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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## ASSESSING CITIZEN PERCEPTIONS ON GRAM PANCHAYAT GOVERNANCE: A DISTRIBUTIONAL ANALYSIS FROM WEST BENGAL

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#### Abstract

Decentralized governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been widely conceptualized as a mechanism for enhancing accountability, inclusiveness, and efficiency in rural service delivery in India. However, empirical assessments of gram panchayat performance have largely relied on aggregate indicators on mean-based satisfaction scores, which tend to obscure significant variations in citizen experiences. This study addresses this methodological limitation by adopting a distribution sensitive analytical framework to examine citizen perceptions of gram panchayat governance in West Bengal. The primary survey data collected from 160 respondents across four districts of West Bengal. The study evaluates ten key governance indicators using a five-point Likert scale. Rather than focusing solely on central tendencies, the analysis emphasizes the distribution of responses across categories, along with aggregated perception groupings. The findings reveal substantial dissatisfaction in critical areas such as fund utilization, responsiveness, and timeliness of service delivery. Moreover, high levels of perceived political bias and favoritism indicate the persistence of elite capture and partisan influence in local governance structures, consistent with political economy perspectives. Similarly, the presence of considerable neutral responses across multiple indicators suggests ambiguity, inconsistent service delivery, and varying levels of citizen awareness. This highlights the inherently uneven and non-uniform nature of governance outcomes at the grassroots level.

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By foregrounding distributional patterns rather than averages. Therefore, the study demonstrates that governance performance is better understood as a spectrum of experiences rather than a single representative value. The paper contributes by advocating distribution-based evaluation and evidence based of variability in local governance outcomes in West Bengal. These findings have important implications for the design of more nuanced and equity-sensitive governance assessment frameworks.

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**Introduction:-**

Decentralization has been widely advanced as a foundational strategy for improving governance, particularly in developing countries where centralized systems often struggle to respond effectively to local needs. The underlying premise is that shifting decision-making authority closer to citizens enhances participation, accountability, and the efficiency of public service delivery (Oates, 1972; Rondinelli, 1981). In the Indian context, this vision was institutionally realized through the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), which formalized Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as a three-tier system of local governance, with gram panchayats functioning as the primary interface between the state and rural citizens. Over the past decades, PRIs have been entrusted with significant responsibilities in areas such as rural development, welfare distribution, and basic service provision. In principle, this decentralization framework is expected to foster participatory governance and ensure that public resources are allocated in a manner that reflects local priorities (Mathew, 2000). However, despite the existence of formal institutional structures, empirical evidence suggests that governance outcomes at the gram panchayat level remain uneven and often inconsistent across regions and communities (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006).

There are limitations in existing research lies in how governance performance is measured. Most empirical studies rely heavily on aggregate indicators such as mean satisfaction scores or composite indices to evaluate service delivery and institutional effectiveness. While such measures provide a convenient summary, which tend to obscure the underlying distribution of citizen experiences. In reality, governance outcomes are rarely uniform who reflect a spectrum of perceptions shaped by variations in administrative capacity, socio-economic conditions, political dynamics, and local institutional practices. Recent scholarly debates in development studies have increasingly emphasized the importance of moving beyond averages to capture distributional heterogeneity in outcomes (Sen, 1999). Therefore, the exclusive reliance on central tendencies may lead to incomplete or even misleading conclusions, particularly in contexts characterized by inequality and institutional variability. In decentralized governance systems, where implementation is mediated by local actors and conditions, such variability is likely to be even more pronounced.

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a distributional analytical perspective to examine citizen perceptions of gram panchayat governance in West Bengal. The study investigates how responses are distributed across different categories of agreement and disagreement rather than focusing solely on average levels of satisfaction. This approach enables the identification of patterns of divergence, clustering of dissatisfaction, and zones of uncertainty reflected in neutral responses. Additionally, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of governance performance at the grassroots level. It highlights not only the extent of dissatisfaction or approval but also the degree of variability and inconsistency in citizen experiences in the context of decentralized governance, where uniformity of outcomes cannot be assumed.

**Literature Review:-****Decentralization and Local Governance Outcomes:-**

Decentralization has long been theorized as a mechanism for improving governance efficiency and responsiveness by aligning decision-making with local preferences. Classical fiscal federalism theory posits that local governments are better positioned to allocate resources efficiently due to their proximity to citizens (Oates, 1972). Similarly, Rondinelli (1981) argues that decentralization enhances administrative effectiveness by reducing bureaucratic bottlenecks and improving service responsiveness. In the Indian context, decentralization through PRIs has been viewed as a critical step toward deepening participatory democracy and promoting inclusive development (Mathew, 2000). The constitutional mandate under the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment sought to institutionalize grassroots governance by devolving functions, funds, and functionaries to local bodies. However, empirical evidence on the outcomes of decentralization remains mixed. While some studies report improvements in participation and service delivery, others highlight persistent challenges arising from uneven institutional capacity and local political dynamics. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) argue that the effectiveness of decentralization is contingent upon local governance capacity, accountability mechanisms, and the socio-political environment within which institutions operate. This suggests that decentralization does not automatically translate into improved governance outcomes, but rather produces context-specific results characterized by variability.

**Service Delivery and Institutional Capacity:-**

The effectiveness of local governance systems is closely linked to their ability to deliver public services efficiently and equitably. Service delivery in decentralized systems depends on multiple factors, including administrative

capacity, financial management, and institutional coordination (Ahmad et al., 2005). Weak administrative structures, limited technical expertise, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms often constrain the performance of local governments. In many developing countries including India, gram panchayats face challenges such as delays in service provision, lack of transparency in fund utilization, and insufficient responsiveness to citizen needs. Grindle (1997) emphasizes that institutional capacity which is defined in terms of organizational effectiveness, human resources, and procedural efficiency is a key determinant of governance performance. However, capacity is weak, decentralization may lead to fragmented and inconsistent service delivery outcomes. Furthermore, variations in infrastructure, resource availability, and administrative practices across regions contribute to differential governance experiences among citizens. This reinforces the need to move beyond uniform assessments and consider the heterogeneity of service delivery outcomes within decentralized systems.

#### **Political Interference and Elite Capture:-**

Numerous literature highlights the influence of political dynamics on local governance outcomes, while decentralization is intended to enhance accountability which may also create opportunities for local elites to capture resources and influence decision-making processes. Bardhan (2002) conceptualizes this phenomenon as “elite capture,” where economically or politically dominant groups disproportionately benefit from public resources. Keefer and Khemani (2005) further argue that political incentives shape the allocation of public goods, often leading to biased service delivery that favours specific groups or constituencies. In such contexts, local governance institutions may function less as mechanisms of public service provision and more as instruments of political patronage. Besley et al. (2005) emphasize the role of accountability mechanisms such as transparency, citizen participation, and institutional checks in mitigating these distortions. However, in the absence of strong accountability frameworks, decentralized governance systems may reproduce or even intensify existing inequalities. Empirical studies in the Indian context have repeatedly pointed to the presence of political bias, favouritism, and patronage networks in gram panchayat functioning. These dynamics significantly shape citizen perceptions of governance and contribute to variations in service access and quality.

#### **Measurement Challenges in Governance Studies:-**

Despite extensive research on decentralization and governance, the measurement of governance performance remains a critical challenge. Most empirical studies rely on aggregate indicators, such as mean satisfaction scores or composite indices to evaluate service delivery and institutional effectiveness. While these measures provide a simplified overview, they often fail to capture the complexity and variability inherent in governance processes. Sen (1999) argues that development and governance outcomes should be assessed not only in terms of averages but also in terms of distributional characteristics. This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts marked by inequality and institutional heterogeneity, where average values may mask significant disparities in individual experiences. Recent methodological discussions have emphasized the importance of incorporating distribution-sensitive approaches in governance analysis. Such approaches allow researchers to examine the spread of responses, identify clusters of dissatisfaction, and capture zones of uncertainty reflected in neutral or ambivalent responses. In the context of decentralized governance, where implementation is mediated by local actors and conditions, the use of distributional analysis becomes especially pertinent. It enables a more nuanced understanding of governance performance by highlighting variability, inconsistency, and divergence in citizen perceptions.

The existing literature underscores three key insights. First, while decentralization holds theoretical promise, its outcomes are highly context-dependent and often uneven. Second, institutional capacity and political dynamics play a critical role in shaping governance performance. Third, existing measurement approaches are limited in their ability to capture variability in citizen experiences. However, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the systematic application of distribution-based analytical frameworks to study governance perceptions. Most studies continue to rely on aggregate indicators, thereby overlooking the internal heterogeneity of responses. This study addresses this gap by adopting a distributional approach to analyse citizen perceptions of gram panchayat governance. Therefore, the study provides a more detailed and nuanced account of governance outcomes, thereby contributing to both methodological advancement and empirical understanding.

#### **Data and Methodology:-**

##### **Research Design:-**

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical cross-sectional research design to examine citizen perceptions of gram panchayat governance in West Bengal. A cross-sectional approach is appropriate as it captures perceptions at a specific point in time, thereby reflecting the prevailing state of governance as experienced by

citizens. Descriptive research is particularly useful for identifying patterns, distributions, and variations within a dataset without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2014). In the context of governance studies, such an approach allows for a systematic examination of citizen experiences across multiple service dimensions, while also enabling the identification of inconsistencies and divergences in perception. The analytical component of the study goes beyond mere description by interpreting patterns in the distribution of responses. This combination of descriptive and analytical approaches is well-suited for studies that aim to uncover variability in governance outcomes rather than establish causal relationships.

#### **Data Source and Sampling:-**

The study is questionnaire based on primary data collected from 160 respondents across four districts of West Bengal, selected from four zones of the state West Bengal to capture diversity in socio-economic and administrative contexts. The districts were Coochbehar, Hooghly, East Medinipur and South 24 Parganas. The use of primary data enables direct engagement with citizen perceptions, which are central to evaluating governance performance. A multi-stage sampling strategy was employed to ensure comprehensive and representative data collection. In the first stage, districts were selected to capture regional diversity and variation. In the second stage, gram panchayat areas were chosen within each selected district to reflect local administrative units. Lastly third stage, respondents were selected at the village level, enabling the study to gather detailed, ground-level information from households within the selected areas. As the study is exploratory and based on participants' perceptions, a purposive, non-probabilistic sampling approach was used to capture a wide range of perspectives rather than to ensure strict statistical generalizability. Efforts were made to ensure heterogeneity in the sample with respect to gender, occupation, and socio-economic background. This diversity enhances the analytical depth of the study by allowing for a broader range of perspectives on governance performance.

#### **Survey Instrument and Measurement:-**

Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire comprising ten statements that capture different dimensions of gram panchayat governance across the selected districts. The study examines ten key indicators of gram panchayat governance, representing multiple dimensions of service delivery and institutional functioning as statements. Each statement was measured on a five-point Likert scale (Strong Disagree – 1; Disagree – 2; Neutral – 3; Agree – 4; Strongly Agree – 5) a widely accepted tool for assessing subjective attitudes and perceptions in social science research. The Likert scale is particularly suitable in this context as it allows respondents to express varying degrees of agreement or disagreement, thereby capturing the intensity of perceptions. Moreover, it facilitates comparability across respondents while preserving the ordinal nature of responses (Boone and Boone, 2012). The use of structured statements ensures consistency in data collection, while the inclusion of a neutral category allows respondents to express uncertainty or ambivalence, an important aspect in analysing variability in governance experiences. These indicators are derived from established governance frameworks that emphasize efficiency, accountability, equity, and responsiveness as core dimensions of institutional performance (Ahmad et al., 2005; World Bank, 2004).

#### **Data Analysis:-**

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, percentage distribution analysis was carried out by calculating the proportion of responses across each Likert scale category for all indicators, allowing the identification of dominant perception patterns as well as levels of agreement, disagreement, and neutrality among respondents. Second, to enhance interpretability, responses were aggregated into three broader categories: negative (combining strongly disagree and disagree), neutral (neither agree nor disagree), and positive (combining agree and strongly agree). This grouping simplifies comparison across indicators while preserving the essential distributional characteristics of the data (DeVellis, 2016). Finally, a comparative indicator analysis was undertaken to examine patterns across different dimensions. This included identifying areas of concentrated dissatisfaction, relatively better-performing aspects, and variations or inconsistencies across indicators, thereby enabling a more comprehensive assessment of governance performance.

### **Results and Discussion:-**

#### **General Distributional Patterns:-**

A key feature of the findings is the non-uniform distribution of responses across indicators (Table 1), indicating that governance performance is uneven rather than consistent. Several indicators show a strong concentration of responses in the negative categories, while others display a more balanced or dispersed distribution (Figure 1). This pattern supports the broader argument in decentralization literature that governance outcomes are context-dependent

and shaped by local institutional and socio-political conditions (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006). Importantly, the presence of substantial neutral responses across most indicators suggests that citizen experiences are neither uniformly positive nor uniformly negative, but rather fragmented and variable.

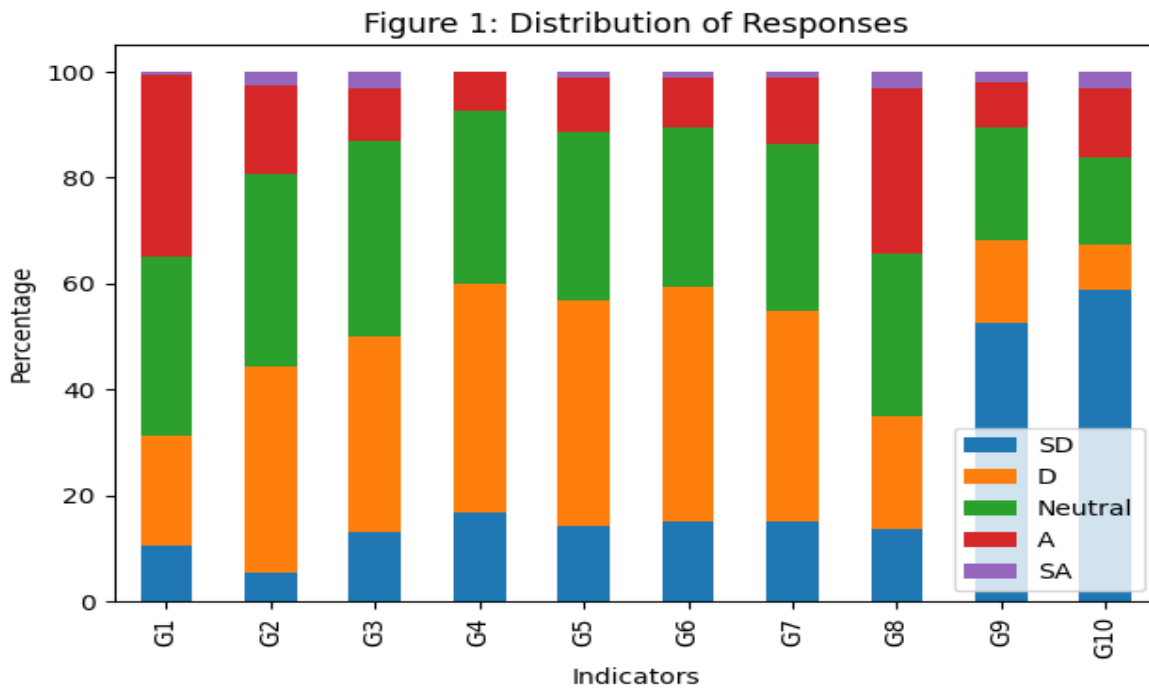
**Service Delivery Dimensions: Adequacy and Accessibility:-**

Service adequacy (G1) presents a relatively balanced distribution, with comparable proportions of positive (35%) and negative (31.25%) responses, alongside a significant neutral segment (33.75%). This indicates that while basic services are perceived as available, their quality and consistency may vary across contexts. In contrast, accessibility (G2) shows a clear skew toward dissatisfaction, with approximately 44.38% of respondents expressing negative perceptions. The relatively high proportion of neutral responses (36.25%) further suggests uneven access, where some beneficiaries are able to utilize services effectively while others face barriers. These findings align with existing research indicating that the mere provision of services does not guarantee equitable access, which is often mediated by infrastructure, awareness, and administrative processes (Ahmad et al., 2005).

**Effectiveness of Service Delivery:-**

The indicator of effectiveness (G3) reveals a predominantly negative perception, with 50% of respondents expressing dissatisfaction and only 13.13% indicating positive experiences. Additionally, the high proportion of neutral responses (36.88%) points toward inconsistency in service outcomes. This distribution suggests that service delivery mechanisms may not function uniformly across different areas or population groups. Such variability is consistent with findings from decentralized governance studies, where differences in local administrative capacity lead to uneven implementation of policies (World Bank, 2004).

**Figure 1: Distribution of respondent perceptions across governance indicators**



**Financial Governance: Fund Utilization:-**

Fund utilization (G4) emerges as one of the most critical areas of concern, with 60% negative responses and minimal positive perception (7.5%). This strong concentration of dissatisfaction indicates a widespread perception of inefficiency or lack of transparency in financial management. As per institutional perspective, weak financial accountability mechanisms can significantly undermine public trust in local governance systems. This finding resonates with prior research emphasizing the importance of transparency and monitoring in ensuring effective decentralized governance (Besley et al., 2005).

**Administrative Responsiveness and Timeliness:-**

The indicators of responsiveness (G5) and timeliness (G6) both exhibit high levels of dissatisfaction, exceeding 55% negative responses in each case. Positive responses remain low, while neutral responses continue to constitute a substantial share. These patterns suggest systemic inefficiencies in administrative functioning, particularly in terms of addressing citizen needs promptly and effectively. Delays and lack of responsiveness are widely recognized as key constraints in local governance systems, often resulting from limited administrative capacity and procedural bottlenecks (Grindle, 1997).

**Proactiveness of Governance:-**

Proactiveness (G7) also reflects a predominantly negative perception (55%), indicating that gram panchayats are largely viewed as reactive rather than anticipatory institutions. The relatively high neutral component (31.25%) further suggests that proactive governance practices are either inconsistent or not clearly visible to citizens. Proactive governance requires forward planning, community engagement, and early identification of issues. The absence of such practices limits the ability of local institutions to address emerging challenges effectively.

**Equity Dimensions in Governance:-**

Gender equity (G8) presents a relatively balanced distribution, with nearly equal proportions of positive (34.38%) and negative (35%) responses. This suggests moderate progress toward inclusiveness, possibly reflecting policy interventions aimed at gender representation in PRIs. However, the presence of a significant neutral segment (30.63%) indicates that experiences of gender equity may vary across contexts, highlighting the need for more consistent implementation. Political neutrality (G9) emerges as one of the most problematic dimensions, with 68.13% negative responses. This indicates a strong perception that governance processes are influenced by political considerations. Similarly, favouritism (G10) records high dissatisfaction (67.5%), reinforcing the perception that access to services may be mediated by personal or political connections. These findings are consistent with political economy analyses that highlight the prevalence of elite capture and patronage in decentralized governance systems (Bardhan, 2002; Keefer and Khemani, 2005).

**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions on Gram Panchayat Governance Indicators**

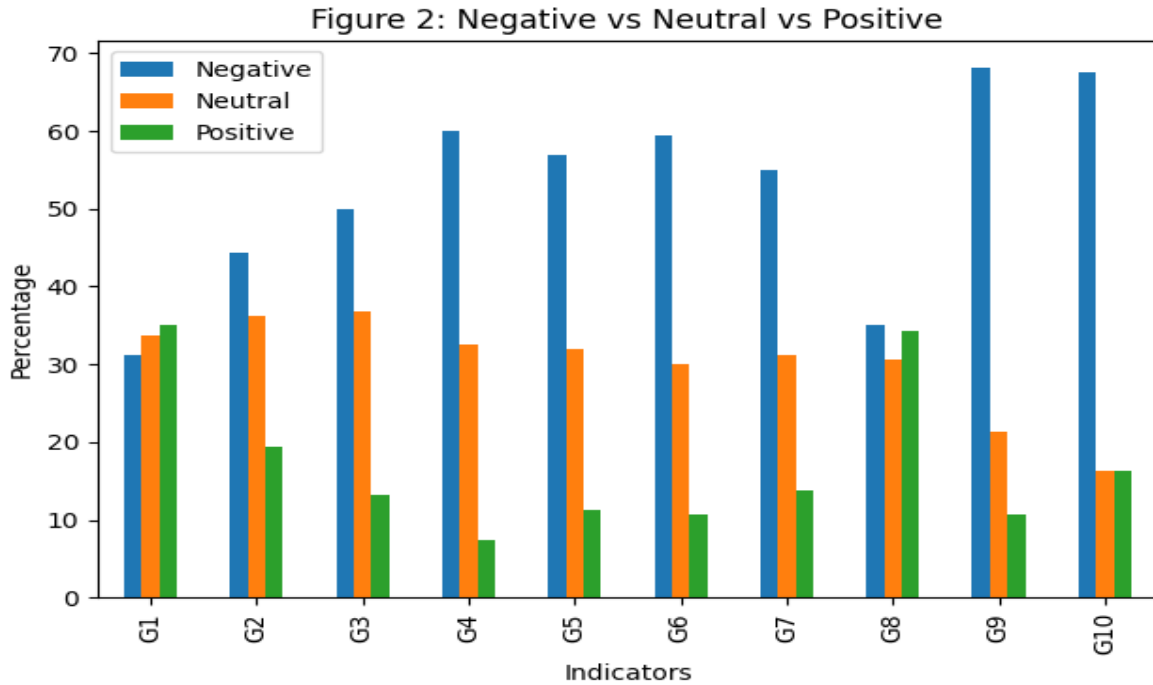
Indicator	SD	D	N	A	SA
Service adequacy (G1)	10.63	20.63	33.75	34.38	0.63
Accessibility(G2)	5.63	38.75	36.25	16.88	2.50
Effectiveness(G3)	13.13	36.88	36.88	10.00	3.13
Fund utilization (G4)	16.88	43.13	32.50	7.50	0.00
Responsiveness(G5)	14.38	42.50	31.88	10.00	1.25
Timeliness(G6)	15.00	44.38	30.00	9.38	1.25
Proactiveness (G7)	15.00	40.00	31.25	12.50	1.25
Gender equity (G8)	13.75	21.25	30.63	31.25	3.13
Political neutrality (G9)	52.50	15.63	21.25	8.75	1.88
Absence of favouritism(G10)	58.75	8.75	16.25	13.13	3.13

**Note: Values are in percentage; SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, DA: Strongly Agree**

**Pattern of Perceptions on Gram Panchayat Governance:-**

The aggregated results reveal a clear pattern of predominantly negative perceptions across most gram panchayat governance indicators. A majority of respondents express dissatisfaction in key functional areas such as fund utilization (G4), timeliness (G6), responsiveness (G5), and proactiveness (G7), where negative responses range from about 55% to 60%. Similarly, effectiveness (G3) and accessibility (G2) also show substantial dissatisfaction, indicating systemic weaknesses in service delivery mechanisms. The most critical concerns emerge in governance integrity-related indicators. Political neutrality (G9) and absence of favouritism (G10) record the highest levels of negative perception, at over two-thirds of respondents, suggesting deep-rooted issues of bias, partiality, and lack of fairness in local governance processes. In contrast, relatively balanced perceptions are observed in service adequacy (G1) and gender equity (G8), where positive responses slightly exceed or closely match negative responses.

**Figure 2: Aggregated perception categories showing dominance of negative responses across key governance dimensions.**



One of the most notable findings of the study is the consistently high proportion of neutral responses across all indicators, ranging from approximately 16% to 37% (Figure 2). These responses are analytically significant as they suggest a degree of uncertainty or lack of awareness among citizens, as well as mixed or inconsistent experiences with service delivery. In some cases, they may also reflect a hesitation to express clear or definitive opinions. Rather than treating neutral responses as insignificant, this study interprets them as meaningful indicators of governance variability and ambiguity. They highlight the uneven nature of service delivery, where outcomes and experiences differ across individuals and locations. Overall, the findings point toward widespread dissatisfaction with governance performance, particularly in transparency, accountability, and efficiency, while also highlighting pockets of relatively better performance alongside significant perceptual ambiguity among respondents.

**Table 2: Indicator-wise Perception Distribution (Aggregated Categories)**

Indicator	Negative (SD+D)	Neutral	Positive (A+SA)
Service adequacy (G1)	31.25	33.75	35.00
Accessibility(G2)	44.38	36.25	19.38
Effectiveness(G3)	50.00	36.88	13.13
Fund utilization (G4)	60.00	32.50	7.50
Responsiveness(G5)	56.88	31.88	11.25
Timeliness(G6)	59.38	30.00	10.63
Proactiveness (G7)	55.00	31.25	13.75
Gender equity (G8)	35.00	30.63	34.38

Political neutrality (G9)	68.13	21.25	10.63
Absence of favouritism(G10)	67.50	16.25	16.25

**Note: Values are in percentage; SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, A: Agree, DA: Strongly Agree**

The overall findings suggest that gram panchayat governance is marked by several structural and perceptual challenges. There are clear signs of administrative inefficiencies, particularly in areas such as responsiveness and timeliness, alongside weak financial governance reflected in widespread dissatisfaction with fund utilization. In addition, strong perceptions of political bias and favouritism point toward the possibility of elite capture within local governance processes. The consistently high and dispersed neutral responses further indicate considerable variability in citizen experiences across different contexts. These findings reinforce the central argument of the study that governance outcomes at the grassroots level are not uniform but exist along a spectrum of experiences. This highlights the limitations of relying solely on average-based assessments and underscores the importance of adopting distribution-sensitive analytical approaches.

### **Policy Implications:-**

The findings of the study have important implications for improving governance at the gram panchayat level:

**Strengthening Financial Transparency:** High dissatisfaction with fund utilization underscores the need for stronger financial oversight mechanisms, including transparent budgeting, public disclosure of expenditures, and community monitoring. **Enhancing Administrative Responsiveness:** Persistent dissatisfaction in responsiveness and timeliness suggests the need for process reforms aimed at reducing delays, improving service delivery efficiency, and strengthening grievance redressal systems. **Addressing Political Bias and Favouritism:** Strong perception of political interference highlights the importance of institutional safeguards to ensure impartial service delivery. This may include strengthening accountability frameworks and promoting rule-based administrative practices. **Improving Citizen Awareness and Engagement:** Prevalence of neutral responses indicates gaps in awareness and engagement. Increasing citizen participation, awareness campaigns, and access to information can help reduce ambiguity and improve accountability. **Focusing on Consistency in Service Delivery:** Policy interventions should move beyond an exclusive focus on improving average performance and instead emphasize the reduction of disparities in service delivery across regions and socio-economic groups, in order to achieve more equitable, consistent, and inclusive governance outcomes.

### **Conclusion:-**

This study helps to examine citizen perceptions of gram panchayat governance in West Bengal through a distribution-sensitive analytical framework. The study contributes to the literature on decentralized governance by advancing a distributional perspective in the evaluation of governance outcomes. However, moving beyond conventional mean-based assessments, the analysis focused on how perceptions are distributed across different categories of agreement, disagreement, and neutrality. The findings demonstrate that governance outcomes at the grassroots level are inherently uneven, heterogeneous, and context-dependent, rather than uniform or centrally clustered. A key insight emerging from the study is the systematic concentration of dissatisfaction in critical governance dimensions, particularly fund utilization, responsiveness, timeliness, political neutrality, and favoritism. These patterns point toward persistent institutional challenges, including administrative inefficiencies, weak accountability mechanisms, and the influence of political dynamics in local governance processes. Moreover, relatively balanced perceptions in areas such as service adequacy and gender equity suggest that certain aspects of governance have achieved moderate levels of effectiveness, albeit inconsistently.

In addition significant finding is the prevalence of neutral responses across all indicators, which reflects ambiguity, variability, and uneven access to services. However, rather than being treated as residual or insignificant, these responses indicate the presence of differentiated citizen experiences, where governance outcomes vary across individuals, locations, and socio-economic contexts. This reinforces the argument that governance performance cannot be adequately captured through single aggregate measures. The study has certain limitations. The sample size restricts statistical generalization, the non-probabilistic sampling approach may introduce selection bias, and the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time. Nevertheless, these constraints do not diminish the study's ability to highlight variability in governance outcomes.

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