Gandhian Swaraj in Practice: A Critical Analysis of Mendha-Lekha's Community Self-Governance and Rural Self-Reliance.

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Abstract:

Contemporary rural development in India has achieved significant progress through economic growth, decentralization, and welfare programmes, yet questions remain regarding their capacity to foster genuine community self-reliance. This paper revisits Gandhi's conception of Swaraj articulated in Hind Swaraj (1909) and examines its contemporary relevance through the case of Mendha Lekha, a tribal village in Maharashtra. A qualitative interpretive case study approach is adopted, using an analytical framework derived from five Gandhian principles: self-rule, self-reliance, social responsibility of property, ethical self-governance, and responsible stewardship of natural resources. The analysis finds that Mendha Lekha substantially embodies these principles through Gram Sabha-centred governance, community forest rights, collective resource management, and livelihood generation. However, sustaining this model requires addressing emerging challenges, including intergenerational institutional continuity, health services, and changing aspirations under globalization. The study argues that Gandhian Swaraj remains a relevant normative framework for strengthening democratic self-governance and promoting sustainable, community-led rural development in twenty-first-century India.

1. Introduction:

India has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing major economies, supported by rapid industrialization, infrastructure development, technological advancement, and increasing integration with the global economy. Alongside economic growth, democratic decentralization has also expanded through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, enabling Panchayati Raj Institutions to play a significant role in local governance. In many parts of the country, these institutions have strengthened grassroots democracy, improved public service delivery, and enhanced community participation in local development. These achievements represent important milestones in India's development journey.

However, an important question still remains. Has development progressively enabled rural communities to become more self-reliant? Public welfare programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), the Public Distribution System (PDS), and several social security schemes have substantially improved food security, employment protection, and the well-being of vulnerable households. These programmes continue to play an essential role in a country where poverty, livelihood insecurity, and malnutrition remain important developmental concerns. Nevertheless, the long-term success of development should not be evaluated solely by the expansion of welfare programmes. A more meaningful measure of development is whether it gradually reduces people's dependence on

external support by creating sustainable livelihood opportunities and strengthening their capacity for self-reliance.

This concern becomes more significant in the context of increasing economic inequality. According to the World Inequality Report 2022, the top 10 per cent of India's population receives 57.1 per cent of the national income and owns 64.6 per cent of the country's wealth, whereas the bottom 50 per cent receives only 13.1 per cent of national income and owns merely 5.9 per cent of total wealth (Chancel et al., 2022). These figures suggest that although economic growth has generated substantial national wealth, its benefits have not been distributed evenly across society. The challenge is particularly visible in rural India, where a large number of landless households, tribal communities, and forest-dependent populations continue to experience insecure livelihoods despite sustained economic growth.

For these communities, livelihoods are closely linked with forests, land, water, and other common natural resources. Therefore, rural development cannot be understood only in terms of higher income, infrastructure, or public expenditure. It must also be assessed by the extent to which local communities acquire greater control over the resources on which their livelihoods depend and develop the institutional capacity to manage them sustainably. From this perspective, development should not merely improve living conditions through public support; it should progressively enable communities to secure their livelihoods through their own institutions, productive resources, and collective action.

It is in this context that Gandhi's idea of Swaraj, articulated in Hind Swaraj (1909), acquires renewed relevance. Gandhi did not conceive Swaraj merely as political independence from colonial rule. He viewed it as a broader framework of self-rule founded on moral responsibility, decentralized decision-making, economic self-reliance, and community stewardship of natural resources. For Gandhi, genuine development was not measured simply by economic expansion or state intervention, but by the ability of individuals and communities to govern themselves, sustain their livelihoods with dignity, and responsibly manage the resources on which they depended.

Against this background, this paper revisits Gandhi's idea of Swaraj as articulated in Hind Swaraj (1909) and examines its contemporary relevance through the experience of Mendha Lekha, a tribal village in Gadhchiroli district of Maharashtra. Through Gramdan, the transfer of decision-making authority to the Gram Sabha, collective management of natural resources, and community-based institutions, Mendha-Lekha represents an important contemporary experiment in self-governance. Rather than assuming that the village embodies Gandhian Swaraj, this study critically examines the extent to which its institutions and practices

correspond with the principles of Swaraj outlined in Hind Swaraj. For this purpose, the paper develops an analytical framework derived from Gandhi's conception of Swaraj and uses it to assess the political, economic, ethical, and institutional dimensions of governance in Mendha-Lekha. The analysis also examines the limitations and emerging challenges of sustaining such a model in the context of changing economic aspirations, market integration, and contemporary rural development. By doing so, the paper seeks to evaluate whether Gandhian Swaraj can continue to serve as a viable framework for democratic self-governance and rural self-reliance in twenty-first-century India.

Research Question

To what extent does the experience of Mendha-Lekha correspond to Gandhi's conception of Swaraj articulated in Hind Swaraj (1909), and what does this reveal about the potential and limitations of community-led rural development in contemporary India?

Objectives of the Study

1. Develop an analytical framework of Gandhian *Swaraj* based on the principles articulated in *Hind Swaraj* (1909).
2. Examine the extent to which the institutions and governance practices of Mendha-Lekha correspond to the principles of Gandhian *Swaraj*.
3. To analyze whether collective ownership, Gram Sabha-centred governance, and community stewardship of natural resources can strengthen rural livelihoods and progressively enhance community self-reliance.
4. Critically examine the opportunities and challenges of sustaining a Gandhian model of *Swaraj* under conditions of globalization and market-led development.

2. Rethinking Rural Development

India's development trajectory over the past three decades has been characterized by rapid economic growth, infrastructure expansion, industrialization, and increasing integration with the global economy. Alongside these changes, democratic decentralization through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has strengthened Panchayati Raj Institutions, enabling greater participation of local communities in development planning and implementation (Manor, 1999; Government of India, 2024).

Despite these achievements, an important question remains: **how should the success of development be evaluated?** Conventional indicators such as GDP growth, infrastructure creation, and public expenditure capture important dimensions of progress, yet they reveal little about whether rural communities have become more capable of securing sustainable livelihoods through their own institutions and productive resources. As Seers (1969) argued,

development should ultimately be assessed by its ability to reduce poverty, unemployment, and inequality, while Sen (1999) emphasized the expansion of people's capabilities rather than income alone.

This question is particularly relevant in rural India, where welfare programmes such as MGNREGS, the Public Distribution System (PDS), and other social protection measures remain indispensable for protecting vulnerable households. The Economic Survey 2023–24 recognizes their important contribution to employment, rural assets, and inclusive development (Government of India, 2024). However, while welfare programmes reduce immediate vulnerability, development should progressively strengthen the capacity of individuals and communities to secure livelihoods through their own productive resources and local institutions.

The need for such a perspective is reinforced by persistent economic inequality. According to the *World Inequality Report 2022*, the richest 10 per cent of India's population receives 57.1 per cent of national income and owns 64.6 per cent of total wealth, whereas the bottom 50 per cent receives only 13.1 per cent of income and owns just 5.9 per cent of wealth (Chancel et al., 2022). These disparities indicate that economic growth alone does not ensure equitable access to productive assets and livelihood opportunities.

This challenge is particularly significant in rural and tribal regions, where livelihoods continue to depend largely on forests, land, water, and other common natural resources. From this perspective, rural development should be evaluated not only by economic growth or welfare provision, but also by its ability to strengthen community institutions, enhance local control over natural resources, and progressively build self-reliant rural communities. It is this broader understanding of development that provides the context for revisiting Gandhi's conception of *Swaraj*.

3. Gandhian Swaraj: An Analytical Framework for Interpreting Rural Development

3.1 Swaraj as an Alternative Vision of Development

Development is no longer understood solely in terms of economic growth, industrial expansion, infrastructure creation, or rising income levels. Contemporary development scholarship increasingly recognizes that genuine development also involves the expansion of human capabilities, dignity, participation, social justice, and the freedom to lead a meaningful life (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2021). Economic progress undoubtedly remains important, yet it constitutes only one dimension of development. The broader challenge is to create conditions in which individuals and communities can secure sustainable livelihoods, participate in

decisions that affect their lives, and live with dignity while maintaining a balanced relationship with society and the natural environment. From this perspective, development concerns not only how much an economy grows, but also how people live and how communities flourish.

More than a century earlier, Gandhi addressed these questions from a fundamentally different perspective in Hind Swaraj (1909). Rather than defining development in terms of material progress or political independence alone, Gandhi proposed an alternative vision of human well-being centred on self-rule, self-reliance, moral responsibility, and community life. His concern was not merely whether India became politically free, but whether individuals and communities became capable of governing themselves, sustaining their livelihoods with dignity, and organizing social life without unnecessary dependence on centralized political and economic systems. Swaraj, therefore, represents not simply a political objective but a comprehensive vision of human development.

3.2 Gandhi's Critique of Modern Civilization

The alternative conception of Swaraj emerges through Gandhi's critique of modern civilization. He argues that modern civilization equates progress with material comfort, technological expansion, increasing consumption, and the multiplication of human wants. Such a civilization gradually shifts human attention away from moral development towards endless pursuit of bodily comfort. As productive activities become increasingly centralized and mechanized, wealth, political authority, and economic power become concentrated, while ordinary people lose control over the productive resources that sustain their lives. Gandhi therefore criticizes not machinery itself but a civilization that makes individuals progressively dependent upon distant markets, centralized institutions, and unlimited material aspirations.

Importantly, Gandhi does not advocate isolation or the rejection of all technology. Rather, he argues that technology should remain subordinate to human welfare. Productive systems should strengthen human capabilities rather than replace them, and economic progress should enhance the dignity of labour rather than create unemployment, inequality, and dependence. Development, therefore, should be evaluated not merely by the quantity of production but by its contribution to human freedom, moral responsibility, and community well-being.

3.3 Core Dimensions of Gandhian Swaraj

Although Hind Swaraj is written as a philosophical dialogue rather than a governance framework, several interrelated principles emerge consistently throughout the text. Collectively, these principles provide a useful basis for interpreting contemporary experiments in decentralized rural development.

First, Swaraj requires self-rule, meaning that people actively participate in governing their own affairs rather than depending upon distant political authorities. Political freedom therefore begins with the capacity of communities to make collective decisions.

Second, Gandhi emphasizes self-reliance. Communities should increasingly secure their livelihoods through their own productive capacities instead of becoming permanently dependent upon external institutions. Productive work is valued because it sustains both economic independence and human dignity.

Third, Gandhi places strong emphasis on the social responsibility of property. Although Hind Swaraj does not reject private property, it consistently rejects unlimited accumulation and argues that wealth should serve social welfare rather than individual greed. Property therefore carries moral obligations towards the wider community.

Fourth, Swaraj rests upon ethical self-governance. Rights cannot be separated from duties, and collective life should be guided by truth, restraint, consensus, and responsibility instead of coercion or competition.

Finally, Gandhi's conception of development assumes a responsible relationship with nature. Natural resources exist to sustain life and livelihoods rather than unlimited economic expansion. Their use must therefore remain consistent with long-term community welfare and intergenerational responsibility. Although Gandhi does not explicitly use the contemporary language of environmental sustainability, his critique of unlimited consumption and his emphasis on restraint provide an ethical foundation for sustainable resource use.

3.4 Analytical Framework for the Present Study

The present study does not treat these principles as a complete interpretation of Gandhian philosophy. Instead, they are translated into analytical dimensions that allow the empirical examination of Mendha-Lekha. The framework is intended to bridge Gandhian normative thought with contemporary rural governance analysis.

Although Hind Swaraj does not present Swaraj as a formal theory of governance, the text consistently returns to a limited number of interrelated themes. Gandhi repeatedly links self-rule with moral self-discipline, productive self-reliance, social responsibility in the use of property, decentralized decision-making, and restraint in the use of resources. These recurring themes provide the conceptual basis for developing the analytical framework used in this study. The framework is therefore not intended as a complete interpretation of Gandhian philosophy; rather, it translates key principles of Hind Swaraj into analytical dimensions that can be used to interpret contemporary rural institutions.

Gandhian Analytical Framework for Evaluating Rural Self-Governance

Gandhian Dimension	Meaning in *Hind Swaraj*	Analytical Question for Mendha lekha
Self-rule	Communities govern themselves through participatory institutions rather than dependence on distant authority.	Does the Gram Sabha exercise genuine decision-making authority?
Self-reliance	Livelihoods are secured primarily through local productive capacities and collective effort.	Does the village strengthen economic self-reliance?
Social Responsibility of Property	Property and productive resources should serve the welfare of the wider community rather than unlimited private accumulation.	Are natural resources managed for collective welfare rather than private gain?
Ethical Self-governance	Collective decisions are guided by truth, restraint, cooperation, consensus, and social responsibility.	Are village decisions based on consensus, participation, and accountability?
Responsible Use of Natural Resources	Natural resources should sustain present and future generations rather than encourage unlimited exploitation.	Does resource governance promote ecological sustainability and long-term livelihoods?

3.5 Applying the Framework to Mendha-Lekha

The above framework provides the conceptual basis for the empirical analysis presented in the following sections. Rather than assuming that Mendha-Lekha represents Gandhian Swaraj, this study examines the extent to which the village's governance institutions, livelihood systems, and resource management practices correspond to the principles articulated in Hind Swaraj. The analysis also recognizes that Mendha-Lekha operates within a contemporary constitutional, legal, and market environment that differs substantially from the historical context in which Gandhi developed his ideas. Consequently, the objective is not to establish a perfect correspondence between Gandhi's vision and present-day practice, but to assess how far Gandhian Swaraj continues to offer a meaningful framework for understanding decentralized rural development in contemporary India.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive case study approach to examine the extent to which the governance practices of Mendha-Lekha correspond with the conception of Swaraj articulated by Gandhi in Hind Swaraj (1909). Rather than testing causal relationships, the study seeks to interpret a contemporary rural institution through an analytical framework derived from Gandhi's conception of Swaraj.

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources, including Hind Swaraj, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest

Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, government reports, and published academic literature on Mendha-Lekha. These documentary sources are analysed through the analytical framework developed in the previous section to examine the village's institutions of self-governance, livelihood systems, community management of property and natural resources, and ethical decision-making.

Mendha-Lekha is selected as a theoretically significant case because it is one of the best-documented examples of community-led forest governance and decentralized village institutions in India. The analysis is interpretive in nature and is intended to assess the contemporary relevance of Gandhian Swaraj rather than to establish causal generalizations. Since the study is based entirely on published documentary evidence, its conclusions are necessarily limited to the scope and quality of the available sources.

5. Mendha-Lekha: Context of the Case Study

Mendha-Lekha is a tribal village located in Dhanora tehsil of Gadhchiroli district, Maharashtra. The village is predominantly inhabited by the Gond community, whose livelihoods have traditionally depended on forests, agriculture, and other common natural resources. Surrounded by mixed deciduous forests, the village has long maintained a close ecological and cultural relationship with its surrounding landscape. This dependence on forests has shaped not only the local economy but also the community's social institutions and collective identity (Government of India, 2006; Kothari et al., 2013).

Mendha-Lekha gained national recognition following the implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, through which the Gram Sabha secured Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights over surrounding forests. Since then, the village has developed a governance system in which decisions regarding forest management, livelihood activities, and community development are taken collectively through the Gram Sabha. This institutional arrangement has enabled the community to combine livelihood generation with responsible management of natural resources while strengthening local decision-making (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2015; Kashwan, 2017).

The significance of Mendha-Lekha for the present study does not lie merely in its successful implementation of community forest rights. Rather, it represents a theoretically significant case through which the principles of Gandhian Swaraj developed in the previous section can be interpreted and examined in a contemporary rural context. The following section therefore evaluates the village through the analytical framework derived from Hind Swaraj.

6. Interpreting Mendha-Lekha through the Gandhian Framework

The significance of Mendha-Lekha lies not merely in the legal recognition of community forest rights, but in the institutional arrangements through which those rights have been translated into self-governance, livelihood security, and collective responsibility. To examine the contemporary relevance of Gandhian Swaraj, the analytical framework developed in Section 3 is applied across five dimensions: self-rule, self-reliance, the social responsibility of property and resources, ethical self-governance, and responsible use of natural resources. The purpose is not to assume that Mendha-Lekha represents a complete realization of Gandhian Swaraj, but to critically assess the extent to which its documented institutions and practices correspond to the principles articulated in Hind Swaraj.

6.1 Self-Rule through the Gram Sabha

The strongest correspondence between Mendha-Lekha and Gandhian Swaraj is found in the functioning of its Gram Sabha. All adult residents are members of the gaon-samaj-sabha, where decisions relating to village development, forest management, external agencies, and collective affairs are taken. Rather than relying on majority voting, discussions continue until broad consensus is reached, and unresolved issues may be referred to the study circle for further deliberation. Published accounts further indicate that even a single dissenting voice is treated as a reason to continue dialogue rather than conclude the decision-making process (Hiralal & Tofa, 2008).

This institutional practice reflects Gandhi's understanding of Swaraj as collective self-rule rather than administrative decentralization. Authority is not simply delegated to elected representatives but remains rooted in continuous public deliberation. Consistent with this principle, government agencies, contractors, and non-governmental organizations are expected to obtain the approval of the Gram Sabha before undertaking activities within the village. The Gram Sabha therefore functions not merely as a statutory institution but as the primary source of local political authority.

At the same time, participation should not be equated automatically with equality. Available studies report substantial community participation, including the active involvement of women in meetings and leadership roles. However, most published evidence comes from sources closely associated with the village, making it difficult to determine the extent to which informal power relations and social inequalities have been fully overcome.

Overall, the functioning of the Gram Sabha corresponds closely with Gandhi's conception of Swaraj, where political authority derives from the informed participation of the community rather than from representative institutions alone.

6.2 Self-Reliance through Community-Controlled Livelihoods

Mendha-Lekha demonstrates how community control over natural resources can strengthen the economic foundations of Swaraj. Following the recognition of Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights under the Forest Rights Act, the village obtained management rights over approximately 1,800 hectares of forest. This enabled the Gram Sabha to regulate bamboo harvesting, transportation, marketing, and forest management, replacing the earlier dependence on contractors and the Forest Department with community-led decision-making (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2015; Kashwan, 2017).

The economic significance of these rights became evident through bamboo management. The Gram Sabha prepared a scientific forest management plan, adopted a transparent tender-based marketing system, and introduced electronic auctions for bamboo sales. Between 2011 and 2014, the village reportedly generated more than ₹1 crore from bamboo trade, a substantial share of which was reinvested in sanitation, soil and water conservation, village infrastructure, and other collective development activities (Centre for Civil Society, 2016). More importantly, the experience demonstrates that natural resources can generate sustainable rural livelihoods when communities possess legally recognized rights, effective local institutions, and control over economic decision-making.

Self-reliance in Mendha-Lekha extends beyond income generation. A community grain bank has been developed in which households contribute a portion of their harvest, while families experiencing food shortages are able to borrow grain and return it after the subsequent harvest. Rather than functioning as a charitable mechanism, the grain bank institutionalizes mutual support and strengthens local food security through community reciprocity (PRADAN, 2018). Together with community-managed financial resources, it reduces vulnerability during periods of crop failure and seasonal distress.

These institutional arrangements do not imply economic isolation from the State or the market. Mendha-Lekha continues to participate in markets and benefits from legal recognition under national legislation. However, its experience demonstrates that market participation need not undermine community autonomy when productive resources remain under collective local governance. In this sense, self-reliance emerges not from complete self-sufficiency but from strengthening the community's capacity to negotiate with the State and the market from a position of institutional strength.

Overall, Mendha-Lekha corresponds closely with Gandhi's conception of economic Swaraj, where dignified livelihoods are secured through local institutions, community

stewardship of productive resources, and responsible participation in wider economic systems rather than dependence upon them.

6.3 Social Responsibility of Property and Resources

Mendha-Lekha provides an important opportunity to examine Gandhi's idea that ownership carries social responsibility. Under the Gramdan process initiated in 2013, landowners voluntarily transferred the legal ownership of their agricultural land to the Gram Sabha while retaining hereditary cultivation rights. Reports indicate that approximately 200 hectares of land previously owned by 52 families came under community ownership, with provisions to allocate land to landless households and restrict its transfer outside the village (Down To Earth, 2023).

This arrangement does not abolish individual use rights. Families continue to cultivate their land and retain the produce of their labour. What changes is the institutional meaning of ownership. Land is no longer treated solely as a transferable private asset but as a community resource governed by social obligations. This closely reflects Gandhi's understanding that property should serve the welfare of the community rather than unrestricted individual interests.

The same principle is reflected in the village fund, where residents contribute a share of non-agricultural earnings, together with fines and other collective revenues, to a common fund administered by the Gram Sabha for village development and shared needs (Down To Earth, 2023). Together with Gramdan, community forest rights, and the grain bank, these institutions integrate individual livelihoods with collective welfare rather than treating them as competing objectives.

Mendha-Lekha therefore does not replace private use rights with collective ownership; instead, it redefines ownership within a broader ethic of social responsibility, closely corresponding to Gandhi's conception of Swaraj and trusteeship.

6.4 Ethical Self-Governance and Collective Responsibility

Mendha-Lekha demonstrates that Gandhian Swaraj depends not only on legal authority but also on ethical self-governance. Consensus-based decision-making requires patience, mutual respect, and a willingness to treat disagreement as part of collective learning rather than political opposition. One documented account describes the presence of an informal “opposition leader” who regularly questions proposals but is regarded as a constructive critic rather than an adversary. This illustrates that dissent is accommodated within the decision-making process rather than suppressed.

The village study circle reinforces this process by providing a forum in which laws, rights, resource management, and community issues are discussed before decisions are taken.

Although it possesses no formal decision-making authority, it enables informed participation and strengthens the quality of deliberation within the Gram Sabha. The village has similarly addressed issues such as alcohol abuse, corruption, forest offences, and women's participation through collective discussion, reflecting Gandhi's view that Swaraj requires moral responsibility and self-discipline in addition to political freedom.

At the same time, consensus is neither simple nor universally applicable. It requires sustained participation, trust, and a willingness to postpone decisions until broad agreement is achieved. Such conditions may become increasingly difficult under changing social aspirations, market pressures, or deep internal divisions. Mendha-Lekha therefore illustrates the possibilities of ethical self-governance without suggesting that consensus can be replicated uncritically in all contexts.

Overall, ethical self-governance in Mendha-Lekha corresponds closely with Gandhi's conception of Swaraj, where democratic institutions are sustained by moral responsibility, informed participation, and institutionalized cooperation rather than legal compulsion alone.

6.5 Responsible Use of Natural Resources

The ecological dimension of Mendha-Lekha's governance is reflected in the way the community integrates livelihood needs with forest conservation. Even before obtaining Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights, the village had established rules against uncontrolled extraction, organized community forest patrolling, prepared forest management plans, and regulated bamboo harvesting to support regeneration (Kothari et al., 2013; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2015).

Community authority over forests does not imply exclusion of economic use. Bamboo and other forest products continue to generate employment and income, but extraction is regulated through locally framed rules and collective oversight rather than by contractors or centralized administration. Published accounts also report that a portion of the community forest has been designated as a biodiversity conservation area where extraction is prohibited (Pathak & Bhushan, 2004; Community Conserved Areas Registry).

This approach demonstrates that conservation and livelihood need not be competing objectives. Forests are treated not merely as commercial assets but as the ecological foundation of long-term community well-being. From a Gandhian perspective, restraint in resource use emerges through community responsibility rather than external regulation. Although Hind Swaraj does not explicitly formulate a theory of ecological sustainability, its emphasis on self-restraint, responsible use of resources, and limits to accumulation finds a practical institutional expression in Mendha-Lekha. The village therefore corresponds closely with Gandhi's

conception of Swaraj, where the use of nature is guided by responsibility towards both the community and future generations.

6.6 Overall Assessment

The analysis suggests that Mendha-Lekha corresponds substantially, though not completely, with the analytical dimensions of Gandhian Swaraj developed in this study. The Gram Sabha provides a practical expression of self-rule; community forest rights and bamboo management strengthen livelihood self-reliance; Gramdan, the village fund, and the grain bank reflect the social responsibility of property; consensus and study circles promote ethical self-governance; and community forest management links livelihood security with ecological responsibility.

These dimensions should not be understood in isolation. Their significance lies in the way they reinforce one another through a coherent system of local institutions. At the same time, Mendha-Lekha should not be regarded as a complete realization of Gandhian Swaraj. Its institutions continue to operate within the wider framework of State policies, markets, and changing social aspirations. The case therefore demonstrates both the contemporary relevance of Gandhian Swaraj and the challenges of sustaining such institutions under changing economic and social conditions. These challenges are examined in the following section.

7. Challenges and Future Prospects of Gandhian Swaraj

The experience of Mendha-Lekha demonstrates that Gandhian Swaraj can provide a practical framework for democratic self-governance, community stewardship of natural resources, and rural self-reliance. The village illustrates how local institutions, when supported by secure community rights and collective participation, can strengthen both livelihoods and ecological sustainability (Gandhi, 1909; Ostrom, 1990; Hiralal & Tofa, 2008). At the same time, the long-term sustainability of this model depends upon its ability to respond to changing social, economic, and generational realities rather than assuming that successful institutions automatically endure over time.

The first challenge concerns intergenerational sustainability. The institutions of Mendha-Lekha were built by a generation that directly experienced poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, dependence on the Forest Department, and a prolonged struggle to secure community forest rights (Hiralal & Tofa, 2008; Shende, 2019). These shared experiences created a strong commitment to collective action, Gram Sabha participation, and responsible management of common resources. However, the present generation has grown up under substantially different conditions. As a result of the village's own institutional success, younger people have experienced improved livelihoods, higher household incomes, greater educational

opportunities, and reduced economic insecurity. Their aspirations are therefore increasingly shaped by higher education, urban employment, digital connectivity, and expanding market opportunities. The central challenge is whether future generations, who have not experienced the historical hardships that gave rise to these institutions, will continue to sustain the same spirit of collective responsibility. As Ostrom (1990) argues, long-enduring institutions require continuous adaptation and renewal of shared norms rather than relying solely on historical experience.

The second challenge concerns human development, particularly the provision of health services. Although Mendha-Lekha has made remarkable progress in community governance and natural resource management, field-based studies indicate that health services, sanitation, nutrition, and public health awareness continue to require greater attention (Shende, 2019). Gandhian Swaraj was never limited to political decentralization or economic self-reliance alone; it envisaged the holistic development of individuals and communities through improvements in health, education, dignity, and social well-being (Gandhi, 1909). Strengthening preventive healthcare, community health institutions, sanitation, and access to quality medical services therefore represents an important direction for the future evolution of Swaraj.

A third challenge arises from the broader context of globalization and changing rural economies. Expanding markets and diversified employment opportunities have improved economic prospects for rural households, but they may also weaken participation in collective institutions and encourage individual interests over community responsibilities. Similar experiences of community-based natural resource governance across Maharashtra demonstrate that such institutions can adapt successfully to different local contexts; nevertheless, their long-term effectiveness depends upon maintaining active participation, trust, and locally legitimate institutions (Ostrom, 1990; Agrawal, 2001). The future relevance of Gandhian Swaraj therefore lies not in resisting economic change, but in ensuring that market opportunities remain guided by the ethical principles of trusteeship, ecological responsibility, and community welfare rather than short-term individual gain.

These challenges should not be interpreted as limitations of Gandhian Swaraj itself. Rather, they demonstrate that Swaraj is a dynamic institutional process that must continuously evolve in response to changing social realities. Mendha-Lekha suggests that community self-governance can remain effective when ethical values are transmitted across generations, local institutions continue to adapt, and improvements in health, education, and human development accompany ecological and economic self-reliance. The enduring contribution of Mendha-

Lekha therefore lies not in offering a fixed model for replication, but in demonstrating how Gandhian principles can be continuously reinterpreted to meet the challenges of contemporary rural development.

8. Policy Implications

The experience of Mendha-Lekha suggests that strengthening rural development requires more than expanding welfare programmes or increasing financial investment. While welfare schemes remain essential for protecting vulnerable households, long-term development should progressively enhance the capacity of rural communities to secure their own livelihoods through stronger local institutions and sustainable management of natural resources.

From this perspective, decentralization should move beyond the formal devolution of powers towards strengthening the functional authority of Gram Sabhas, particularly in tribal and forest-dependent regions. Effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act (2006) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) require greater recognition of community institutions in local resource governance. Policies should therefore focus not only on transferring legal rights but also on building institutional capacity for participatory decision-making, transparent resource management, and collective accountability.

The findings also suggest that development policy should increasingly view natural resources as the foundation of sustainable rural livelihoods rather than merely as economic assets. Community participation in the management of forests and other common resources can simultaneously contribute to livelihood security, ecological conservation, and democratic decentralization. Rather than replicating Mendha-Lekha as a uniform model, public policy should encourage locally adapted institutions that reflect Gandhian principles of self-rule, self-reliance, and collective responsibility within diverse ecological and social contexts.

9. Conclusion

This study examined whether Gandhian Swaraj, as articulated in Hind Swaraj (1909), continues to offer a meaningful framework for rural development in contemporary India. Moving beyond conventional measures of development based primarily on economic growth, welfare expansion, or infrastructure, the paper argued that development should also be assessed by the extent to which it strengthens the capacity of communities to govern themselves, secure sustainable livelihoods, and manage their natural resources responsibly.

Using Mendha-Lekha as an interpretive case, the study demonstrated that several core dimensions of Gandhian Swaraj—including self-rule, self-reliance, ethical self-governance, social responsibility in the use of property and natural resources, and collective decision-making—can be translated into functioning rural institutions. At the same time, the analysis

also showed that Mendha-Lekha should not be regarded as a complete realization of Gandhian Swaraj or as a model that can be replicated uniformly across rural India. Its continued success depends upon favourable legal frameworks, strong community institutions, ecological conditions, and the capacity to respond to changing social and economic realities.

The broader contribution of this study therefore lies not in presenting Mendha-Lekha as an ideal village, but in demonstrating that Gandhian Swaraj remains a relevant normative framework for rethinking rural development. The experience of Mendha-Lekha suggests that welfare programs and economic growth alone cannot constitute the ultimate objective of development. Their long- term success should be reflected in the gradual emergence of self-reliant communities capable of managing their own resources, strengthening local democracy, and securing dignified livelihoods. In this sense, Gandhian Swaraj continues to provide an important intellectual foundation for imagining a more decentralized, participatory, and sustainable pathway of rural development in contemporary India.

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