

Strengthening Democratic Processes through Enhancing People's Participation in *Gram Sabha*

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ABSTRACT *Gram Sabha* is the institutionalized foundation for a decentralized participatory democracy. However, *Gram Sabhas* are not yet functional enough to accomplish their role in the making of a vibrant Indian democracy. The main reasons seem to be the lack of people's participation, lack of awareness amongst the elected representatives of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, ritualistic conduct of the *Gram Sabha* meetings, poor information communication, sparse attendance in the *Gram Sabha* meetings, and a lack of clear understanding amongst the people about the importance and the functions of the *Gram Sabha*. Thus, there is a need to strengthen the *Gram Sabha* by increasing the participation of members in the meetings so that they can directly participate in governance. This paper highlights the present scenario of *Gram Sabha* and ways for increasing people's participation in this Constitutional body.

INTRODUCTION

India lives in villages and unless village life is revitalized the nation as a whole can hardly make any progress. Thus, there is a need to involve the people in the decision-making processes at the grassroots. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment provides a unique opportunity to promote local self-governance in rural areas through establishment of the *Gram Sabha*¹ under Article 243 A (Handbook for Elective Representatives 2011). It is not about a representative democracy, but governance by direct, active and fullest participation of people. *Gram Sabha* is the Constitutional forum for participatory governance of the *Gram Panchayat*². It is a body of all adult members of a *Gram Panchayat* who have the right to vote, and it has been conceptualized as a forum of villagers to ensure the accountability of the elected representatives at the village level and has been recommended to act as a watchdog on the working of the *Gram Panchayat* besides facilitating the rural people's participation in the decision-making processes (Basu 2010; Hazara 2013). The main objective of introducing *Gram Sabha* is to have decentralized planning and evaluation with people's participation at the grassroots. The concept of eradication of discrimination and facilitation of peo-

ple's participation from all walks of social life in the management of affairs of their locality were the foundation for the emergence of a comprehensive *Panchayat*-level institution called *Gram Sabha*. Transparency and intimacy become a part and parcel of this institution (Dwarakanath 2013).

Gram Sabha is the embodiment of the idea that people's participation alone can bring sustainable development through good governance at the grassroots (Rashid and Sen 2010). Participation, whether directly or indirectly, can make the system more accountable and transparent and helps promote and enhance the leadership qualities and self-confidence of people (Bhat 2016). Greater the participation of the people, better will be the check on the quality of governance of the local bodies. But the type of participation is also imperative. The numbers alone will not lead to better governance. The people should be willing to ask questions and fix accountability on the elected members and also on the officials for any lapses (John 2010).

Objective

To highlight the present scenario of *Gram Sabha* and suggest the ways for increasing people's participation in *Gram Sabha*.

OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

Functions of Gram Sabha (<https://panchayat.gujarat.gov.in>)

Gram Sabha is the foundation of the grass-roots level democratic institutions and has to perform the various functions for the development of village and villagers. The functions of Gram Sabha vary from state to state.

Community Welfare Function

Gram Sabha considers, suggests and approves the development works and schemes for the next year from the budget of the Panchayat as well as from various other sources such as government departments, DRDA, Block/District *Panchayats* and own funds to take maximum advantage for the welfare of the people. It decides priority of works and schemes and locations thereof.

Gram Sabha informs the public regarding various community and beneficiaries oriented schemes and also identifies the beneficiaries in order of priority. *Gram Sabha* reviews and revises every year's disaster mitigation plan with respect to any natural calamities like fire, floods or earthquake and takes all protective measures in advance.

Gram Sabha propagates and advises people about personal, property, health and crop insurance scheme to help them in adverse circumstances. It mobilizes voluntary labor and contribution of kind and cash. *Gram Sabha* promotes unity and harmony among all the sections of the rural community.

Budget and Administration

Gram Sabha examines annual statements of accounts, audit report, audit note and seeks clarification from the *Gram Panchayat*. It discusses report on the administration of the preceding year and considers proposals for fresh taxation or for enhancement of existing taxation.

Gram Sabha supervises all local institutions and functionaries in all social sectors.

Gram Sabha reviews law and order positions and takes steps to organize village volunteer force or home guards, if necessary. It also reviews relief measures, if necessary, with respect to food, fodder, drinking water, cash doles or relief works.

Physical Development

Gram Sabha considers and gives opinion about the sites for permission of excavation of minor minerals. It considers and suggests for rehabilitation problems and programs in big projects in the village. *Gram Sabha* reviews and makes recommendations with respect to works and schemes sanctioned, in progress and funds received and spent for social audit. It maintains a complete register for all development works undertaken by *Gram Panchayat* or any other department.

Gram Sabha reviews position of encroachment on government or *Panchayat* land and unauthorized construction and measures to remove and control them by taking community efforts with time bound programs or legal actions as a last resort. It plans and manages minor water bodies such as wells, tanks, streams and takes all steps to augment water sources by various methods such as check-dams and watersheds and water conservation schemes. It preserves, protects and develops natural resources and environment.

Organization of Gram Sabha Meeting

(Handbook for Panchayati Raj Elected Representatives 2011)

Meetings of *Gram Sabha* should compulsorily be held at least twice a year. *Gram Sabha* can be convened as and when necessary and as many times depending on the need. *Gram Sabha* should be conducted at a place convenient to all the members. *Gram Sabha* requires a quorum of ten percent of the total *Gram Sabha* members. The *Sarpanch* of the Gram Panchayat presides over the *Gram Sabha*. In the absence of *Sarpanch*³, the *Up-Sarpanch*⁴ presides over the *Gram Sabha*. The purpose, time and place of *Gram Sabha* meeting must be intimated through a notice given at least 15 days prior to the date of meeting. The *Gram Sabha* meeting should be conducted only after a proper notice of purpose, place and time is issued.

Process of Organizing Gram Sabha Meetings

(Handbook for Panchayati Raj Elected Representatives 2011)

Preparation of Gram Sabha Meetings

Agenda and date for *Gram Sabha* meeting is finalized in consultation with the *Sarpanch*.

Once date for *Gram Sabha* meeting is finalized, a notice of the meeting should be issued 15 days prior to the proposed date. The *Gram Sabha* meeting details, such as the date, time, venue and agenda should be publicized widely to make aware the members about the meeting. The Action Taken Report on the resolutions of the previous *Gram Sabha* meeting and notes on the agenda items of the current *Gram Sabha* meeting should be prepared prior to the meeting. Proper seating, drinking water and sanitation facilities for people attending the *Gram Sabha* meeting should be arranged.

The Block Development Officer should be intimated and the B.D.O. or his representative would attend the meeting as a non-voting member. The Member of Parliament (MP), Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), *Pradhan*⁵, *Zila Pramukh*⁶ and members of the *Panchayat Samiti*⁷ and *Zila Parishad*⁸ may also attend the meeting as non-voting members.

Gram Sabha Meeting

The details of members attending the meeting of *Gram Sabha* should be recorded in register on the day of the meeting. The presentation of Action Taken Report on resolutions of previous *Gram Sabha* meeting is mandatory. Secretary records the minutes of the *Gram Sabha* meeting and reads aloud the proposals and the minutes of the meeting. Members approve the proposals and minutes of the meeting by giving their signature or thumb impression. Chairperson should ensure that the *Gram Sabha* meeting is conducted smoothly as per its Agenda.

In a true sense, *Gram Sabha* is the first level of a democratic decision making body. It can be termed as the modern form of direct democracy. But the question is whether it is functioning in its true sense. It has been noticed that meetings of *Gram Sabha* have been a mere formality. In most of the states, the people are apathetic towards this Constitutional body.

Present Scenario of *Gram Sabha*

At present, there are about 31.27 lakhs elected representatives at all levels in the *Panchayat Raj System*⁹. These members represent more than 2,47,166 *Gram Panchayats*, 6,283 intermediate level tier and 595 district *Panchayats* (www.panchayat.gov.in, 2016). Spread over the

length and breadth of the country, the *Panchayats* cover about ninety-six percent of India's more than 5.8 lakh (580,000) villages and nearly 99.6 percent of the rural population (Wikipedia).

The present scenario of the functioning of the *Gram Sabha* is a bit critical considering the assumptions with which it was introduced. It cannot be denied that it is not easy for a mandated body to perform its function, especially when it concerns people, contesting with the social realities of stark power imbalances (Hazra 2013). The working of *Gram Sabha* throughout Indian states substantiates that there is galloping gap between theory and practice between what it could and what it does. *Gram Sabha* has so far failed to fulfill its role as a deliberative body (Patil 2016). In most of the states, the people are apathetic towards this body. In Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa and West Bengal, *Gram Sabha* is not active in the desired way and not playing a sufficiently active role in program planning and implementation (Basu 2010). Though there are provisions for representation of the weaker sections of the society in terms of caste, tribe and gender, implying the same on the ground is a different story all together. The marginalized section of any community is in a worse position than others (Hazra 2013; John 2010; Rashid and Sen 2010; Shivashankar 2000; Pal 2000). The women participants have been silent spectators. Even women members of *Panchayat* are neglected. The power given to women members is exercised by their male relatives-father, brother, husband or son. Further, the block officials do not entertain them. So they hesitate to visit the block headquarters and interact with the officials (Rashid and Sen 2010). Women are participating passively without being actively involved in the deliberations. There is dissatisfaction among the youth towards the *Gram Sabha* meetings (Veerasha 2010).

Lack of awareness, interest, positive attitude, understanding and consensus among the *Gram Sabha* members often contributes to limited presence and participation (Bhat 2016; Reddy 2015; Hazra 2013; Shivashankar 2000). The difficulty lies in motivating the villagers to attend the *Gram Sabha* meetings. In most of the backward villages, in the absence of a common public, the vested interests are likely to influence the proceedings, which may not be in the felt need or real interest of the community (Hazra 2013). Meet-

ings were conducted without any consideration of quorum and these meetings hardly meet the required quorum in most of the Gram Panchayats (Patil 2016; Nayakara 2010; Pal 2000). The agenda items are often limited to works taken up by the *Panchayats* and therefore many people have no interest to participate in the meetings. Decisions that are supposed to be taken by the *Gram Sabha* are taken by the local elite, thereby rendering this body redundant. Lack of sufficient publicity, constant changes in Nodal Officers, non-presentation of Action Taken Reports of previous meetings, dominance of ruling party cadres and lack of transparency in recording the minutes of *Gram Sabha* has led to loss of faith in the people in the system of *Gram Sabha*. Lack of cooperation from the various departments like the revenue department and State Electricity Boards are also reasons for uninspiring performance of *Gram Sabha* (Shivashankar 2000). Hence, this body could not deliver the expected results.

Some studies given below show the picture of people's participation in *Gram Sabha*:

The Institute of Local Self Government and Responsible Citizenship, Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur had attended and observed 204 *Gram Sabha* meetings in Badgaon and Gogunda block during August 2010 to November 2013. The Institute reported that the total presence of voters was 4.3 percent in 2010, which then increased to 4.9 percent in 2011, 5.3 percent in 2012 and 8.3 percent in 2013. Although the participation of people in *Gram Sabhas* is still not ideal, there has been an increase of attendance each year due to the Institute's efforts, especially its capacity enhancement program and focus on Ward Sabha meetings.

Singh (2013) stated that the *Gram Sabha* institution is dysfunctional due to lack of leverage of local leaders to initiate meaningful participation in *Gram Sabha* and therein capability to persuade people to support local initiatives. He reported in his study that out of 800 households only 23.88 percent regularly participated in *Gram Sabha* meetings whereas 33.00 percent seldom attended the meetings. Remaining 43.12 percent households never participated in the meetings.

Basu (2010) observed that women representation and the representation of the weaker section was more than thirty percent in Tamil Nadu whereas the representation of women of Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan was less than ten

percent and weaker sections were not participating. The reason for low representation in the *Gram Sabha* meetings was lack of interest by the weaker sections and especially women.

Nayakara (2010) stated that the extent of the people's participation in *Gram Sabha* meetings of village *panchayats* of Sriperumbudur Block in Tamil Nadu hardly meets the required quorum for the meeting. As *Gram Sabha* meetings were conducted during the morning times, most members working in the nearby industries were not able to attend. Youth and women participated in the *Gram Sabha* meetings but their participation was mostly passive. Women were not informed and invited to the *Gram Sabha* meetings and most of the women hesitate in participating in *Gram Sabha* meetings in the presence of a large number of elder members (Nambiar 2001). Also, women are generally tied up with household responsibilities, which left them very little time to attend *Gram Sabha* meetings (Sinha et al. 2002).

Despite all these limitations, there is no other alternative to *Gram Sabha*. Activation of *Gram Sabha* can be done by effective participation of local people from all gender, caste, creed and income groups.

Ways of Increasing People's Participation in *Gram Sabha*

Following ways would be helpful in increasing people's participation and involvement in *Gram Sabha* to strengthen the democratic process:

1. **Capacity Enhancement of Elected Representatives:** It has been observed that most of the *Panchayat* members are either illiterate or semi-literate, which becomes a roadblock in their understanding of the acts, rules and bureaucratic procedures. Hence, the elected members should be trained and educated either at the district or block level, about their roles and responsibilities towards their *Gram Sabha* and should be motivated to rise above the party politics and to be able to say no to corruption.
2. **Creating Awareness Among Gram Sabha Members:** Awareness needs to be created at the village level about the rights and responsibilities of the *Gram Sabha* members. They must be educated and motivated to use their Constitutional rights.

3. **Ward Sabha Meetings:** *Ward Sabha*¹⁰ meetings should be organized before the *Gram Sabha* meeting to effectively bring the grassroots issues to the *Gram Sabha*. Ward-wise meetings would enable more voters to participate in the deliberations. The Ward members can decide upon the priorities of issues. As the area and population of a Ward Sabha is smaller and commonality of interest greater, people would discuss with close involvement and evolve a consensus on matters that they wish to be taken up by their elected Ward Member to the Gram Panchayat.
4. **Regular Meetings of the Gram Sabha:** It has been observed that the *Gram Sabha* meetings do not take place regularly. It is advised that these meetings should be held at least 3 to 4 times a year. The minutes of meetings should be displayed in the Gram Panchayat along with the signatories, that is members of the *Gram Sabha*. A copy each should be sent to the *Panchayat Samiti* and *Zila Parishad*.
5. **Vigilance Committees and Social Audit Forums:** Vigilance Committees at the village level and Social Audit Forum (SAF) at the *Gram Panchayat* level should be constituted by each *Gram Sabha*. The members of these committees should be from amongst the villagers. However, the committees may include one or two experts who may be individuals or from voluntary organizations. The Vigilance Committees will monitor the works at the village level, while the Social Audit Forum will audit the works at the *Gram Panchayat* level.
6. **Involvement of People in Planning, Budgeting and Auditing of Development Works:** Participation of the people should be increased in planning, budgeting and auditing of all the development works to be carried out at the village level. This will create a sense of responsibility for both *Panchayat* as well as *Gram Sabha*. Strengthening people's participation in the *Gram Sabha* is a critical prerequisite for making *Panchayats* accountable to the people.
7. **Harmonization among Gram Sabha Members:** Caste and party politics are major factors causing lack of coordination among *Gram Sabha* members. The influential people, elected representatives and government officials (*Panchayat* Secretary and higher officers) make better use of the infighting for their greed and selfish interests. So, villagers should be oriented and motivated to practice better coordination among themselves for the development of their village.
8. **Capacity Building of Villagers:** The socio-cultural reasons, the mindset of being the ruled, the inability to ask questions and the *Gram Sabha* meetings being dominated by a few influential persons play a critical role in the lack of interest amongst people towards *Gram Sabha*. So, village level programs should be conducted for the capacity building of the voters, especially youth and women. These may include short-term trainings, awareness camps and informative-educative-cultural programs at the village and publication and distribution of related materials. Also, Block Development Officers should regularly attend *Gram Sabha* meetings.
9. **Displaying Information on Notice Boards:** *Gram Sabha* should demand from the *Panchayat* to display all the information, about the works being carried out and sanctioned, on *Panchayat* notice board for all to see.
10. **Enhancing Participation of Women and Weaker Sections:** It has been noticed that the elected women representatives act as a signatory only and all the work is done by the male members of her family. In most of the cases women representatives are not even aware about the activities and the work being done in their village. Instead they should be allowed to conduct *Gram Sabha* meetings and carry out other developmental works. This will also help in creating a gender sensitive *Panchayat*. Women should be motivated to participate in the *Gram Sabha*. Similarly, participation should be ensured of ST, SC, BC and other weaker sections of the society. It should be seen that sitting arrangement is equal for all the members of the *Gram Sabha*. Women and weaker sections are encouraged on their presence and active participation in the meetings and that their issues get due importance in the prioritization of works.

11. **Use of Media:** Media is considered to be the fourth pillar of democracy. Presently, rural issues find very little space in the mainstream media. Media should take responsibility to reach to the rural areas and spread awareness through news and features, which focus on grassroots issues and participatory governance.
12. **Videography of Gram Sabha Meetings:** Videography of *Gram Sabha* meetings should be done to avoid any kind of manipulation at any level. The video should be available at the *Gram Panchayat* office for everyone to see. This will help enhance the trust of people in *Gram Sabha* meetings.
13. **Information of Government Activities and Schemes through Gram Sabha:** Information regarding all government activities at the *Gram Panchayat* level and beneficiary schemes should be given in the *Gram Sabha* meeting. This would create interest among the people to participate in the meetings.
14. **Identification of Beneficiaries of Schemes:** Beneficiaries of various schemes should be identified and approved only in the *Gram Sabha* meetings. Wherever possible, disbursement under various schemes should be made in the *Gram Sabha*, so that benefits would go to right persons only. This, in turn, would help increase the participation of people in *Gram Sabha*.
15. **Proper Publicity of Gram Sabha Meeting:** Publicity of *Gram Sabha* meeting should be done to ensure greater participation of villagers. Posters should be pasted at important places in villages and pamphlets should be distributed at schools and *anganwadis*¹¹ to communicate the *Gram Sabha* meeting schedule to the parents through the children. Notice of date, time, place and purpose of *Gram Sabha* meeting should also be put at public places to make it the 'talk of the town'. Information of the meeting should be spread through women self-help groups, progressive farmers and youth associations.
16. **Proper Recording of the Minutes of Gram Sabha Meeting:** The minutes of *Gram Sabha* meeting should be recorded properly and displayed on the notice board of the *Gram Panchayat* office so that villagers know about the decisions.
17. **Ensuring Correct Attendance of Villagers in Gram Sabha Meeting:** It has been observed that the *Sarpanch*, Secretary and other officials make up fake attendance to show the quorum. Instead the real presence should be recorded and displayed with the minutes by name and in numbers to avoid any misrepresentation.
18. **Strengthening Women Self-help Groups:** The women self-help group members should be empowered in the functioning of their group as well as political participation in the *Gram Sabha*. A good beginning can be an orientation on *Gram Sabha* and enhancing their participation therein. They can play an important role in designing and implementing the policies and programs, especially those catering to the needs of fellow women. Hence, they become community leaders who represent the problems of rural women whose needs find little space in the policies and programs at the state and national levels.
19. **Right to Information:** The Right to Information Act of 2005 has proved to be a successful weapon in bringing transparency and accountability in the functioning of the public bodies. But it is not being utilized to its fullest at the village level because of little awareness about this Act. Transparency in decisions and in the income and expenditure of the *Gram Panchayat* can be achieved if the RTI Act is put to practice.
20. **Enhancing Education Level of People:** It has been noted that in rural areas the level of education is very low, which needs to be enhanced through new initiatives in education policies with special focus on the needs and feasibility in the rural areas.
21. **Development and Use of Audio-Visual Aids:** Audio-visual aids can play an important role in creating awareness about *Gram Sabha*. Various audio-visual materials like films, posters and charts can be developed and distributed among *Gram Sabha* members to generate awareness about *Gram Sabha* and its role and importance of their participation. These materials can also be used for giving information about the *Gram Sabha* meeting like date, time, agenda and venue.

CONCLUSION

Gram Sabha is not a standalone body in the sense that it is largely affected by the socio-political scenario. Social churning, especially since the 1990s, has had a transforming effect on the balance of power in the entire country. In some states it decisively tilted in favour of the erstwhile marginalized sections of the society, though women still remain excluded. But in the more feudal dominated and backward states rural society and polity are still struggling to break through the shackles of their past.

However, no better opportunity, and with such Constitutional authority, can provide for what the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution has brought in the form of PRS and especially the *Gram Sabha*, which is the first stage to a true participatory democratic system. Elections every five year spring new elected representatives from the same village community and, even for name sake, the traditional hierarchies have broken. All villagers have to accept a woman or a person from the ST or SC community as their *Sarpanch*, who presides over the *Gram Sabha* meetings. Devolution of powers and funds may be argued as further source of corruption but it has an empowering effect nonetheless, when people themselves decide about and allocate for the development of their ward and village in a *Gram Sabha* meeting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Voluntary organizations should come forward for focused capacity enhancement of the elected representatives in particular and the members of the *Gram Sabha*- especially women and youth- in general. They should conduct separate programs for spreading awareness about annual action plan, budget and audit to check corruption, which will instill confidence in the people as they would be able to judge the progress of developmental works and social security schemes. Government and voluntary organizations should initiate special programs for the literacy of the elected representatives so that they can perform and participate in the functioning of the *Gram Panchayat* and the *Gram Sabha*; government already has proven programmes for adult literacy. Media should become an enabling factor by playing an educative, motivational and a critical adversarial role. These

initiatives may provide for the desired stimulus and impetus towards better presence and participation in the *Gram Sabha* meetings thereby evolving our democratic institutions into a system of actual participatory governance. Moreover, *Gram Sabha* can well become a forum for nurturing of future leaders, public servants, entrepreneurs and social workers who will be connected with the problems, demands and opportunities at the grassroots.

NOTES

- 1 *Gram Sabha* consists of all the adult voters registered in the *Gram Panchayat* area. It is the general assembly or village Parliament of a *Gram Panchayat*.
- 2 *Gram Panchayat* may consist of several revenue villages; its functionaries are the representatives elected by the adult voting members of the *Gram Sabha*. This institution of local self government is the third tier in the *Panchayati Raj* System. The number of members in a *Gram Panchayat* depend upon the population of the village.
- 3 Head or Chairperson of *Gram Panchayat*
- 4 Deputy Chairperson of *Gram Panchayat*
- 5 Head of Panchayat Samiti.
- 6 Head of Zila Parishad.
- 7 Second Tier of Panchayati Raj System. It is an intermediate level at the block level.
- 8 First tier of Panchayati Raj at the district level.
- 9 Panchayati Raj System (PRS) was introduced by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to the Constitution of India. The three tier system for the rural local bodies has elected representatives at the village, block and district levels. Seats are reserved for women and ST & SC in the elections, which are held every five years for all three tiers. State Finance Commissions reviews and revises the financial position of PRS. The 11th Schedule of the Constitution provides for devolution of 29 Subjects to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). *Gram Sabha* and *Ward Sabhas* (Ward level bodies in a *Gram Panchayat*) take participatory democracy to the grassroots.
- 10 The *Ward Sabha* consists of all the registered voters in a Ward of a *Gram Panchayat*.
- 11 Anaganwadi is a rural mother and child care centre.

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