

The Stage of Direct Democracy - A Case Study on Participation of People

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Abstract: *The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 has made specific provision for the establishment of GramaSabha under Article 243A. It defines GramaSabha as “a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within areas of Panchayat at the village level”. GramaSabha plays an important role in preparing village plans and deciding development priorities in the village. In democratic decentralization it is the fourth tier in the hierarchy of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Article 243A states that the GramaSabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of State may provide. It is the real duty of a citizen to attend the GramaSabha of his/her Ward. Now the participation of people particularly educated youths, high income people and the men is decreasing and there is a lack of participation of employed persons in the Government and Private institutions. The lack of participation in the stage of direct democracy (GramaSabha) leads the non-participation of people in our democracy. This situation needs a change. So the present study intends to develop an understanding on the same.*

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, GramaSabha, Participation of People, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Woman Empowerment

1. Introduction

India has a long ancient tradition of having self - governing institutions right from the beginning of Vedic period to the present modern local government system in the form of Panchayats and Municipalities. Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the Panchayati Raj System in Rajasthan on 02.10.1959 to involve the rural people in the process of governance. After passing many ups and downs Panchayats and Municipalities got the constitutional status in the year 1992 - 93 as the third - tier of governance structures in the democracy at the local level. As per the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts - 1992 - 93, Panchayats and Municipalities are defined as institutions of self - government in the rural and urban areas respectively. 73rd Amendment to the Constitution has envisaged that the Panchayath Raj Institutions should function as institutions of local self governance for the empowerment and development of the community.

Gram Sabha is the soul of the Panchayati Raj System where people can directly participate and exercise their rights, obligations and concerns about their own development process. The Gram Sabha has been given a vital role to play in improving the service delivery mechanism in rural areas. One of the key features of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) has been the role assigned to the Gram Sabha, ‘the assembly of the voters in a ward’ as a deliberative and deciding body. In this manner an element of direct democracy is introduced at the lowest level.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the present study are as following:

- 1) To understand the performance of performance and the level of awareness of the people about Gram Sabha in the Village Panchayats.

- 2) To analyze involvement of youths, women, employees, workers etc. in the Gram Sabha.
- 3) To study the role of Gram Sabha in the rural governance.

Gramasabha

The year 2010 has been declared as the ‘year of the Gram Sabha by the Government. The Gram Sabha has been defined as a collective of people in a village within the area of a panchayat who are registered in the electoral rolls. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 has made specific provision for the establishment of Gram Sabha under Article 243A. Gram Sabha as “a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within areas of Panchayat at the village level”. Accordingly, a Gram Sabha is established for a village or a group of villages and serves as an assembly of villagers. The size of the Gram Sabha differs from State to State. Article 243A states that the Gram Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of State may provide. It generally covers minimum of 1000 and a maximum of 15, 000 populations in case it is co - terminus with Gram Panchayats. Gram Sabha is key to the self - governance. Active participation of its members and monitoring its functioning will make the meaningful meeting of the Gram Sabha. There is a need to evolve mechanism to understand the classification of poor and prioritization of needs of households are taken in to account before selecting the beneficiaries may formulate the efficient Gram Sabha.

Oommen John says the functioning of Gram Sabha as an institution for planning, an institution for identification of beneficiaries and as an institution of Social Audit in Kerala. In the Panchayati Raj set up, the Gram Sabha, the general assembly of villagers has a key role for effective functioning of Panchayats. In the Gram Sabha meeting, the rural poor, the women and the marginalised people gets an opportunity to be a part of the decision making on matters affecting their

lives. Active functioning of the Gram Sabha would ensure a participatory democracy with transparency, accountability and achievement. Gramasabha has the right to supervise and monitor the functioning of Panchayat elected representatives and government functionaries, and examine the annual statement of accounts and audit reports. As per Article 243 - G, Panchayats are constitutionally mandated to prepare plans for economic development and social justice. Thus every Panchayat has to prepare a plan taking into account local needs and local conditions.

The Gram Sabha plays an important role in preparing village plans and deciding development priorities in the village. But in most villages this active and important role of the Gram Sabha has not been fulfilled in reality. In many villages, Gram Sabha meetings have been reduced to a mere formality. The Gram Sabha serves to keep Gram Panchayat accountable. Most of the Gram Sabha members are unaware of their rights and responsibilities as Gram Sabha members.

2. Methodology

To understand the participation of people in Gram Sabha, the study was conducted in Vithura Grama Panchayat. In Vithura Grama Panchayat, there are seventeen Wards. Among this, two Wards namely Theviyode and Manithookki were selected for the study. The study is designed as an empirical based on the survey method and both primary and secondary data was used for the study.

The secondary data was collected from the documentary sources from the Village Panchayat, journals, magazines and from the selected websites.

The primary data collected by using interview schedule. There are three classes of respondents chosen for the study. Common people, elected representatives and officials. Separate interview schedules were administered for public and the officials.

Simple random sampling method was used for selecting the common people. The total number of sample size chosen for the study is 60. Common people were chosen randomly for the responses. The elected Panchayat representatives and officials are selected through convenient sampling.

3. Discussion of Analysis

Table 1: Distribution of the classes of the Respondents

S. No	Respondents	Number
1	Common People	50
2	Elected Representatives	4
3	Panchayat Officials	6
	Total	60

Source: Survey Data

Table 3: Gender Participation of people in Gramasabha

Name of Ward	Gramasabha I					Gramasabha II				
	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Male	%	Female	%	Total
Thevi	12	9.	116	90	128	18	10	146	89	164

Socio - Economic Profile of the Respondents

This section gives the socio - economic background of the respondents attending the gram sabha in the two Wards. The socio - economic profile of the respondents is analyzed with the help of variables such as age, education, gender, income and other aspects to determine the attitude towards the gram sabha. The sample data were collected from the 50 common people during the period April 2013 to March 2014. Sixty per cent of the common people are male while the remaining forty per cent are female. The distribution of these respondents regarding the age group is 20 - 70. Regarding their marital status, 95 percentage married while the remaining 5 percentage is unmarried. Referring to the educational level, the majority of the respondents in the common people category have secondary education. But all sample officials have a graduate degree. Majority respondents belong under the income group below 10, 000 as monthly income.

As part of democratic decentralization, GramaSabhas are conducted for various purposes in Local Self Governments. In Village Panchayats, GramaSabhas are conducting mainly for:

- formulating plans and programmes of Village Panchayats.
- for conducting Social Audit.
- for monitoring and evaluating the plans which are implemented by the local body.
- for mobilizing suggestions to improve the smooth functioning of local bodies.
- for settlement of problems and disputes in the local areas.
- for deciding priority and selecting individual beneficiaries of plans of Village Panchayats.

Table 2: Total Participation in GramaSabha Meeting

S. No	Name of Ward	Total Voters	Plan Formulation		Selection of Beneficiaries	
			Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	Theviyode	1158	128	11.05	164	14.16
2	Manithookki	1236	139	11.25	143	11.57

Source: Secondary Data

The minimum quorum for the people’s participation according to the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act 1994 is one - tenth of the total eligible voter’s population in the Ward. The gram sabha has been conducted frequently in both the villages in accordance to the provisions of the Kerala Panchayati Raj Act 1994. Most of the respondents are well aware of these dates as it was frequently gram sabha meetings were taking place during these dates. The extent of the people’s participation hardly meets the required quorum for the meeting. As gram sabha meetings were conducted during the morning, youths, men, farmers and workers were not able to attend. Likewise, the table shows that participation of people is more in gramasabha for selecting individual beneficiaries. In fact, the participation is ineffective.

yode		37		.6	8		.9		.0	4
				3			8		2	
Manit	16	11	123	88	13	9	6.	134	93	14
hookk		.5		.4	9		29		.7	3
i		1		9					1	

Source: Secondary Data

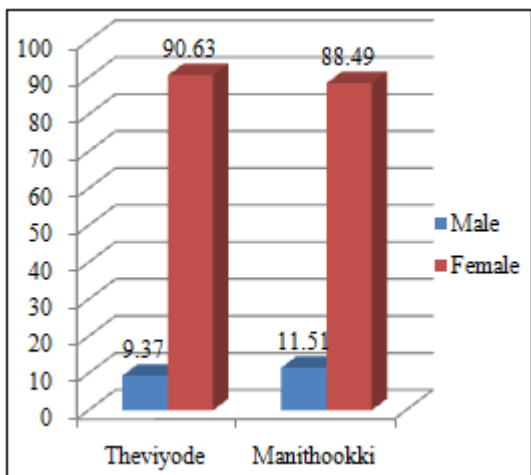


Figure 1

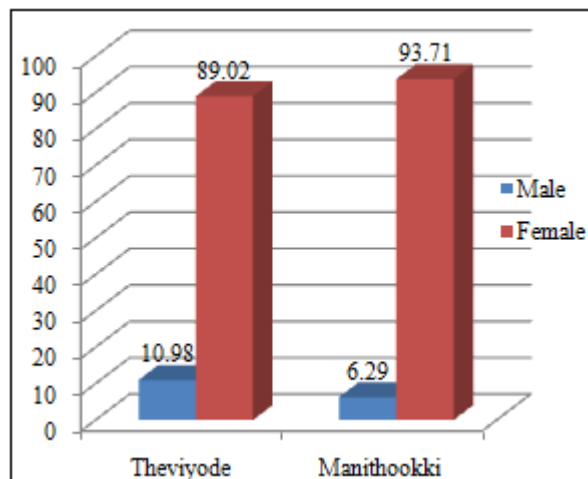


Figure 2

Gramasabha 1 Gramasabha 2

The participation of the women remains high in both the wards. Most of the participants are actively participating in the discussions. One of the positive signs is that women are showing much more interest in participating in the meetings.

Table 4: Category of People

Name of Ward	GramaSabha 1						GramaSabha 11					
	MGNREGS Workers	%	Employed person	%	Others	%	MGNREGS Workers	%	Employed person	%	Other	%
Theviyode	84	65.63	-----	---	44	34.37	112	68.29	-----	-----	52	31.71
ManithooKki	112	80.58	-----	-----	27	19.42	99	69.23	-----	-----	44	30.77

Source: Secondary Data

The table shows that the majority of participants are in the category of MGNREGS workers. The table depicts the employment guarantee programme of Central Government widely influence the women workers in rural and backward area. Another thing is less participation of employed youths. In fact, the educated employed persons have no role in decentralized planning process. So this situation needs a change.

4. Findings

From the analysis of the primary and secondary data, we can learn there are some problems behind the less participation of people in GramaSabha.

- 1) As majority men have their employment and job, they are unwilling to take leave from the job for at least one day for attending gramasabha.
- 2) As compared to other state, the women in Kerala have got primary and secondary education. As they are capable to attending gramasabha, the men give the responsibility to them to attend the gramasabha.
- 3) Highly educated men and women are thinking, it is useless to them and it is only for people.
- 4) People in high income group are not interesting to participate in gramasabha because many of them have no social interaction and no democratic thinking. They are also not interested in dealing with the social issues.
- 5) Very low income group have no sufficient knowledge about the importance of gramasabha.
- 6) People in non - priority group and APL category thinks that they get nothing from the gramasabha as benefits.

- 7) No serious deliberations and discussions are taking place in the gram sabha meetings.
- 8) One of the significant findings is that even the elected panchayat representatives
- 9) are unaware about the role and the importance of gram sabha in the democracy.
- 10) The role of effective leadership plays an important part in ensuring the fruits of democracy to the people. There is a lack of leadership which is required to improve the rural governance.
- 11) The participation of the women is increasing in gramasabhas.
- 12) Even educated voters are unaware about the importance of gram sabha.
- 13) The study finds out the gram sabha is not functioning up to the expected level because of lack of effective leadership, lack of effective administrative support, lack of adequate publicity for the gram sabha meetings, lack of strong political will to strengthen the gramasabha.

5. Suggestions for the Improvement

- 1) There should be continuous and constant information regarding the role and importance of gram sabha to the people and there should be a constant, suitable place to conduct the gram sabha meetings.
- 2) The local media such as newspapers, news channels should be involved in the dissemination of the information about the importance of gram sabha.

- 3) The success stories of gram sabha should be documented and screened in every village panchayat.
- 4) The practice, importance of gram sabha should be taught at the primary school and secondary
- 5) School levels to understand the concept of democracy among the children and the adolescents who are future citizens of the nation.
- 6) Youth should assign some responsibilities in the implementation of development programmes so that youth will feel that they are also having a role in improving the conditions of the people.
- 7) In the schools and colleges there should be an enabling environment for the democratic practices for the children, youth to understand the spirit of democracy.
- 8) To help the Panchayats to identify the problems and needs of the village, a team of the responsible villagers other than the elected members may constitute. Encourage to all the household in a village to give suggestions and representations.
- 9) Complaint and Suggestion Box should be place in public places of the village.

6. Conclusion

The lessons from Kerala experience is that the active participation of people in the local governance and development can be ensured if a due space is provided to them. The GramaSabha envisaged in Kerala is a leap towards not only the vibrant participatory planning but also participatory monitoring and social audit. The effective participation of people is necessary for the smooth functioning of a local body. So the present situation of the ineffective participation of people in the direct democracy needs a change.

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