

From Representation to Participation: Odisha's Governance Transformation through Palli Sabha and Grama Sabha

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Abstract: Governance in India has increasingly shifted from a purely representative model to a participatory framework, emphasizing direct citizen involvement in decision-making. Odisha exemplifies this transformation through the institutionalization of Palli Sabha and Grama Sabha under the Panchayati Raj system. These grassroots forums aim to close the distance between elected representatives and citizens by enabling community participation in development planning, beneficiary selection, and monitoring of welfare schemes. This paper explores Odisha's governance transformation by analysing the role and functioning of Palli Sabha and Grama Sabha in promoting participatory democracy. It examines the legislative and policy provisions that empower these institutions and their contributions to implementing flagship programs such as MGNREGA and social security schemes. Findings suggest that these participatory bodies have enhanced transparency, accountability, and localized decision-making, thereby strengthening democratic governance. However, persistent challenges—such as elite dominance, low awareness, gender gaps, and administrative bottlenecks—continue to limit their effectiveness. The study, based on qualitative analysis of secondary sources, argues that participatory institutions in Odisha are not mere procedural entities but vital mechanisms for inclusive development and community empowerment. The paper concludes that Odisha's experience offers critical lessons for deepening democracy in India by complementing representative structures with participatory practices, ensuring governance that is both responsive and inclusive.

Keywords: Participatory Democracy, Representative Democracy, Odisha, Palli Sabha, Grama Sabha, Governance, Decentralization

1. Introduction

Representative, or indirect, form of democracy has been the foundation of Indian governance for a long time, with elected representatives acting on behalf of the people. While this model enables broad-based decision-making, it often falls short in ensuring meaningful participation at the grassroots. In recent years, Odisha has become a pioneering state in transitioning from a model of mere representation to one that actively fosters participation. Central to this transformation are the institutions of *Palli Sabha* and *Grama Sabha*, which have empowered citizens to take part directly in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of development activities in their villages. The *Grama Sabha*, as mandated by the 73rd time Amendment or modification to the Constitution Act, serves as the cornerstone of rural India's decentralized government. This is a forum through which the villagers can express their needs, scrutinize government actions, and hold officials accountable. Odisha has not only strengthened this constitutional mechanism but also innovatively introduced the *Palli Sabha*—a sub-structure of the *Grama Sabha*—to further decentralize decision-making and enhance local engagement. These bodies ensure that development schemes are no longer top-down impositions but are tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of the people. Through legal reforms, institutional capacity-building, and community mobilization, the Odisha government has successfully institutionalized participatory governance practices. Initiatives such as the People's Plan Campaign, direct social audits, and inclusive village development plans have increased transparency, accountability, and civic ownership of public resources. The active involvement of women, SCs, STs, and other marginalized communities in these local governance

mechanisms also reflects a significant shift toward social equity and empowerment. This transformation from representation to participation in Odisha's rural governance structure illustrates a broader democratic deepening. It serves as a model for other states in India, showcasing how participatory democracy can be effectively operationalized at the grassroots level. By making governance more inclusive, responsive, and people-centric, Odisha's emphasis on *Palli Sabha* and *Grama Sabha* marks a significant milestone in India's democratic journey.

2. Review of Literature

Pravat Kumar Datta, (2021) in his book "Deliberative Democracy in Indian Villages" has explained that, the amendment of India's Constitution in 1992 was a watershed moment in the history of village deliberative democracy in India, as it mandated all state or provincial governments to establish Gram Sabhas as grassroots participatory institutions. It included a new dimension to deliberative democracy by requiring women and remaining other marginalized groups to be represented and by establishing panchayats as self-governing organizations and tools for economic development planning and social justice. This chapter examines the various Gram Sabhas' operations in the basis of empirical research and considers the institutions' future while accounting for the structural limitations of Indian village society and other difficulties.

Mahi Pal has done an analysis of Indian Gramme Sabha meetings in 2009. He chose just one district, the Sirsa district in India's Haryana State, with the primary goals of Villagers' engagement & participation in their socio-economic development process. He discovered several

issues with meetings or assembly of the Gram Sabha there, in addition to the fact that people attend them quite frequently since they are conscious of the issues. The Sarpanch was unaware of the Gram Sabha meetings, yet the villagers were present at practically every Gram Sabha gathering.

Gayadhar Malik & Dr. Smita Nayak in 2019 has jointly explained in their research paper named “Participatory Development and Governance in Rural India: A Case Study of Palli Sabha in Odisha” following the institutionalization of participatory democracy under the Seventy Third Amendment to the Indian Constitution, rural development has gained particular attention in recent years. Some states, like Kerala, Rajasthan, West Bengal, and Odisha, have established new institutions closer to the villages to assure their participation, even though the constitutional amendment aimed to institutionalize villagers' participation through a body called the Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha.

Nirmala Buch in December 1997, a study of 11 Madhy Pradesh Gram Panchayats revealed that not all of the Panchas were present at the Gram Sabha meetings, which was far from sufficient. To top it all off, over half of the Gram Sabha assembly or meetings lacked a quorum. This was a serious finding of her study.

M. Ghatak & M. Ghatak carried out research in May 1999 on how Gram Sansad operated in a sample of 20 communities. The study highlights some significant problems. It demonstrates that among the attendees of the meetings, agricultural labourers made up the largest single category, followed by farmers/peasants with less than two (2) acres of land. Additionally, this study finds out that proposals for road maintenance, tube well installation, and loan dispersion holds greater significance than more general concerns that labour unions, political parties or peasant organizations are concerned with, including economic liberalization and public sector privatization.

Snehalata Panda (1996), in her study in Odisha she found women are interested to participate in politics because of due to mandatory provisions of reservation. Women's reservation in Panchayati Raj which creates women's empowerment and taking decision through participation known as participatory democracy for village community development. It has been shown that most of the female members those are from non-political background and had enter into politics due to their family members or political favouritism.

3. Statement of the Problem

In India's democratic framework, governance at the grassroots level is envisioned as a participatory process, with institutions like the Palli Sabha and Grama Sabha serving as the cornerstone of decentralized decision-making. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution (1992) provided these bodies with statutory recognition to ensure people's direct involvement in local governance, moving beyond the limitations of mere electoral representation. In Odisha, these forums were established to empower citizens, enhance transparency, and address local needs through collective

deliberation and consensus. However, despite the constitutional mandate and state-level initiatives, the actual transformation from *representation* to *participation* remains an ongoing challenge. While elected representatives are intended to act as facilitators of community-driven decisions, in practice, these assemblies often suffer from low attendance, limited awareness among citizens, bureaucratic dominance, and political influence. As a result, the democratic promise of inclusive, bottom-up governance is frequently undermined. In Odisha, there have been commendable policy steps—such as integrating *Palli Sabha* and *Grama Sabha* into key developmental schemes and social audits—but gaps persist in ensuring their effectiveness as platforms for participatory democracy. The transition from a representative model, where choices are made on behalf of people, to a participatory model, where people actively shape decisions, is complex and influenced by socio-political, cultural, and administrative factors.

Understanding how *Palli Sabha* and *Grama Sabha* function in practice, the degree of genuine citizen participation, and the challenges or hurdles to their effective implementation is essential for assessing Odisha's governance transformation. Without addressing these issues, the state risks maintaining a symbolic form of participation rather than achieving the transformative, citizen-centric governance envisioned by decentralization reforms.

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To examine the evolution and legal framework of *Palli Sabha* and *Grama Sabha* in Odisha, with reference to their role in promoting participatory governance as envisioned under the 73rd CAA of 1992.
- 2) To assess the amount and nature of citizen participation in *Palli Sabha* and *Grama Sabha* meetings, focusing on attendance, inclusivity, and the quality of deliberations in decision-making processes.
- 3) To identify the key challenges and constraints—administrative, political, social, and cultural—that hinders the effective functioning of these grassroots institutions in Odisha.
- 4) To evaluate the impact of *Palli Sabha* and *Grama Sabha* on local governance outcomes, particularly in terms of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to community needs.

4. Method of Study

This study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data to explore Odisha's governance transformation through the functioning of *Palli Sabha* and *Grama Sabha*. Government Reports and Policy Documents, PESA Act 1996, 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Odisha Gram Panchayat Act., Scholarly Articles and Journals, Books and Edited Volumes, Reports by Non-Governmental Organizations and Think Tanks, Media Sources and News Archives are included in this research as secondary source of data. The study adopts a qualitative analytical approach, interpreting existing literature and data to trace the shift from representative to participatory governance. There is focus on the institutional mechanisms, legal frameworks, and socio-political dynamics that mould the functioning and usefulness of *Palli Sabha* and *Grama Sabha* in Odisha. Limitations of

the research or study include the absence of primary fieldwork, which may restrict real-time insights into grassroots-level participation and perceptions. However, the depth and breadth of available secondary data provide a strong foundation for understanding the systemic changes in governance structures.

1) Grama Sabha and Palli Sabha: An Overview

Grama Sabha and Palli Sabha are vital village-level democratic institutions in India, especially in states like Odisha, where participatory governance has gained increasing importance. Rooted 73rd CAA of 1992, these institutions serve as platforms for direct involvement of villagers in local decision-making, ensuring transparency, accountability, and grassroots democracy. The Grama Sabha comprises all registered voters of a GP (a cluster of villages). This is the foundational structure of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and performs or functions as a deliberative platform where local residents can express opinions concerns, approve development plans, and monitor the execution of schemes. It is legally empowered to sanction social and economic development initiatives, approve beneficiaries for welfare schemes, and ensure that governance remains people-centric.

The Palli Sabha, specific to Odisha, operates at the revenue village level and can be viewed as a subset of the Grama Sabha. While the Grama Sabha performs at the Panchayat level, the Palli Sabha brings governance even closer to the citizens by involving every small village in decision-making. It plays a key role in planning, prioritizing developmental needs, and implementing village-level projects. Under laws like the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) 1996, the Palli Sabha holds special significance in tribal areas, safeguarding local customs, land rights, and community resources. Together, these institutions embody the shift from representative to participatory democracy, empowering rural populations to shape their own development. Their effectiveness, however, depends on regular meetings, active citizen participation, and administrative support. In Odisha, strengthening these Sabhas has been central to governance reforms aimed at inclusion, accountability, and sustainable rural development.

2) Mandatory Functions or Role of Palli Sabha & Gram Sabha in Odisha

The Gram Sabha was empowered by the Gram Panchayat Act of 1964 in Odisha which gave it the following statutory functions:

- a) **Approve Development Initiatives:** Review and give approval to all economic and social progress plans, programs, and projects before the GP begins implementing them.
- b) **Select Beneficiaries:** Identify and choose individuals to benefit from poverty alleviation and similar welfare schemes.
- c) **Ensure Fund Utilization Accountability:** The GP must obtain a utilization certificate from the Gram Sabha/Palli Sabha confirming the appropriate use of money for the approved plans and projects mentioned above.
- d) **Review Annual Budget:** Examine and finalize or approve the Gram Panchayat's annual budget, including any supplementary, additional or revised versions.

- e) **Evaluate Taxes and Fees:** Review and give opinions on the imposition of taxes, rates, and fees, as well as any proposed increases.
- f) **Promote Community and Agricultural Activities:** Facilitate community services and develop and implement agricultural production plans.
- g) **Decision-Making on Referred Matters:** Consider and decide on issues that the Gram Panchayat refers for consultation or approval.
- h) **Request Information:** Seek necessary information or data from the Gram Panchayat as needed for informed decision-making.
- i) **Conduct Social Audit:** Maintaining social audit regularly on public projects to ensure the utilisation of public goods.
- j) **Address Other Prescribed Matters:** Review and act on any additional issues as prescribed by relevant regulations or authorities.

In the same manner, the Act provides that, in compliance with the terms of Sub-Section (1), the Gram Sabha's meetings will be called by the designated authority, within the recommended manner, at specified times and intervals. Section (5) further specifies that the work of the Gram Sabha/Palli Sabha must be carried out, and its proceedings recorded, in the manner prescribed by law. Additionally, the Act clarifies that the Gram Sabha has the power or authority to protect and maintain community resources, cultural identity, customs, local traditions and customary dispute resolution procedures in scheduled areas, so long as they are in line with current laws, constitutional principles, and human rights. According to the Section 6(1) Under the Gram Panchayat (GP) Act of 1964 in Odisha the State or Provincial Government shall constitute a Palli Sabha for each village amidst the Gram. However, in cases where a ward under Section 8 encompasses of many villages, but only a single Palli Sabha will be established for that ward. Sub-Clause (2) specifies that each Palli Sabha shall include every person whose name is registered under the Representation of People Act, 1950, in the list or directory of voters for the concerned Assembly Constituency for the area falling under the Palli Sabha. This portion of the voting list shall be treated as the voting rolls of the Palli Sabha itself. The Act also states that the Palli Sabha must hold an annual meeting every February and may also convene at other times, in coherence with the recommended procedure.

Sub-Cluse Four (4) of Section Six (6) of the Gram Panchayat (GP) Act of 1964 in Odisha provides that the representative of the Palli Sabha area in the GP shall supervise its meetings. If there are several such representatives, one will be selected from the directory of representatives in the preferred order decided by the Gram Panchayat. For instance, that none of these representatives are in presence or attendance at the scheduled time of the meeting, the members attending may choose a member to serve as president the proceedings. The Act specifies that the quorum for a Palli Sabha meeting shall consist of 1/10th of its total members. The meeting will be postponed to a later date if the necessary quorum is not reached, for which due notice must be issued in the recommended manner. For such adjourned meetings, no quorum will be necessary. Furthermore, if someone participant of the Palli Sabha

submits a complaint, either in writing or in person, during the next Gram Panchayat meeting alleging that the report or proceedings were not accurately recorded or obtained by the President, the Gram Panchayat (GP) may, at its concealment or discretion, call for another Palli Sabha meeting to reconsider the matter. This meeting shall be commenced in the presence or attendance of a Panchayat member who is not linked with the concerned Palli Sabha, and the decision or policy taken in this meeting shall be considered final.

According to the Act, the Palli Sabha is necessary to advise the Gram Panchayat (GP) on issues pertaining to its authority at its annual meeting in February. These consist of:

- a) Development projects and initiatives for the next year, and
- b) The Gram Panchayat's yearly budget projections as provided by Sub-Section (1) of Section 98.

Section 7 further clarifies that these clauses won't be applicable in cases where a Gram consists of only a single village.

The main platform for public participation in local administration or governance decision-making is the Gram Sabha. As an outcome, it is anticipated to hold a key place in the process or system. Panchayats, the fundamental tier of village-level self-governance, are charged with maintaining openness between the populace and the government. As a result, the Gram Sabha must approve all actions performed by village panchayats, holding the PRIs directly responsible to the citizen or people. The Gram Sabha is also in charge of approving a variety of plans and schemes, including choosing the recipients of government initiatives that have an immediate influence on village life. Nevertheless, real-world experience reflects that Gram Sabhas have historically performed poorly, with the exception of this year. This is caused by a number of circumstances. One of the main causes is the public's ignorance of the importance of the Gram Sabha/Palli Sabha and their part in it. Sarpanches have occasionally displayed little interest in calling meetings, while in other situations; outside forces have played a section in the Sabha's inefficiency. Insufficient publicity, poor communication, and inadequate Sharing of information have further weakened its vibrancy. More importantly, the Gram Sabha/Palli Sabha has not been vested with adequate powers, and its decisions are sometimes overruled at higher levels. Even Gram Panchayats often fail to respect its resolutions. Additionally, meetings are frequently scheduled at times when villagers are engaged in farming/agricultural or other remaining livelihood activities, which reduce participation. Hence, there is an urgent necessity to create greater awareness among the people regarding the efficacy of the Panchayat or local system, with special attention on the Gram Sabha's pivotal role in strengthening local self-governance and promoting good governance at the grassroots level.

3) Odisha Government's Efforts towards Strengthening the Functions of the Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha:

Over the past few decades, the Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha has witnessed a decline in its significance, primarily due to low levels of public participation and growing mistrust among people regarding its effectiveness. Acknowledging the

crucial role of Palli Sabhas/Gram Sabhas in the effective execution of government programs, plans and schemes, the State or provincial Government recognized the necessity of reviving their functioning. Despite being a constitutional body, the Gram Sabha, inadequate consciousness or awareness among the general population hindered its proper conduct. To address this concern, the Panchayati Raj Department, Odisha Government has launched the *Gram Sabha Empowerment Programme (GSEP)* on 2nd October 2012 across the State. Spanning 45 days, the initiative sought to mobilize communities and strengthen the Institutional ability of PRIs through technical and administrative support. This marked an important step towards reinforcing the system or structure of local self-governance in Odisha.

With the following goals, the initiative made it easier for the Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha to do their business:

- a) To create awareness and mobilize communities for participatory planning.
- b) To enhance the capacity or ability of PRIs and their elected representatives for effective organizing and carrying out of government schemes.
- c) To ensure smooth and effective functioning of Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha.
- d) To promote wider public participation in village-level planning.
- e) To foster convergence among line departments at the village level.
- f) To maintain a database of the Annual Action Plan, beneficiary lists, and project details, and to make these accessible to the public.
- g) To promote transparency and accountability through web-based data management systems.

4) Measures Taken to Enhance the Functioning of Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha:

A comprehensive communication plan was set up to encourage people's participation in the acts or conduct of Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha. To suit local awareness and requirements levels, a wide variety of resources for communication were developed. As a component of the Gram Sabha Empowerment Programme (GSEP), multiple Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) activities were carried out at the village, Gram Panchayat, block, and district levels. These included distributing invitation or solicitation cards to every household, displaying banners and hoardings in public open places, spreading leaflets, making announcements through microphones, and mobilizing people via letters of appeal from the Hon'ble CM of Odisha. Such efforts facilitated the readiness and quick submission of village-level plans, ensuring improved cash flow and efficient use of resources. The programme was executed in a stepwise approach all over the State, achieving a remarkable success rate of 99.44% in the activate of Palli Sabhas and 97.37% in Gram Sabhas. The media also participated actively in generating awareness and providing extensive coverage from the Panchayat to the State level. Technical support from a dedicated State-level team, along with proactive engagement of district and block administrations and cooperation from the PRIs, further strengthened the campaign. The Panchayati Raj Department, Odisha Government, acted as the nodal or primary agency, covering

6,236 GPs among 30 districts, including 314 blocks, reaching individuals or population of over 3.5 crores. Several other departments—such as SC & ST Development, Development of Women & Child (DWC), Rural Development (RD), Dept. of Health & Family Welfare, Agriculture, School and Mass Education (SME), and Tourism & Culture—also participated in the initiative or campaign. The initiative sought to revive all essential components of an effective Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha via mobilization of the community, awareness generation, and information dissemination. Special efforts were made to encourage leadership among marginalized groups and to ensure the active participation of women, SCs, STs, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). A day-long IEC Mela organized on the very beginning day of the Gram Sabha provided villagers with background information through exhibitions, cultural events, and deals with officials from various departments. For the preliminary time in Odisha, all Gram Sabha proceedings held during the campaign were video recorded to promote transparency and enhance people's participation. Another notable feature of the programme was the systematic capture, analysis, and meaningful use of data or information generated in the Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha for rural planning and implementation. Information technology (Its) was also used comprehensively for the primary time, contributing to greater efficiency, accountability, and transparency or openness in the process.

5) How Odisha's Governance Processes got Transformed through Palli Sabha & Gram Sabha:

- Shift from representative democracy to participatory democracy at the very base or grassroots level.
- Constitutional recognition of Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha as forums of direct people's participation.
- Villagers empowered to approve development plans, select beneficiaries, and monitor Panchayat activities.
- Gram Sabha Empowerment Programme (2012) launched to strengthen participation across the State.
- Use of community mobilization and awareness campaigns to increase public involvement.
- Capacity building of PRIs and elected representatives for effective planning and implementation.
- Active inclusion of women, SCs, STs, and marginalized groups in decision-making.
- Use of technology and data management for greater transparency and accountability.
- Media outreach, IEC activities, and government coordination ensured wider participation and awareness.
- Governance processes became more transparent, accountable, inclusive, and people-centric.

6) Suggestions to Improve the Effectiveness of Palli Sabha & Gram Sabha in Odisha:

- Generate public awareness within the community about the significance of Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha in the local governance system.
- Ensure proactive participation of members from all three (3) tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).
- Mobilize the community in a campaign mode to encourage active participation in Palli Sabha & Gram Sabha proceedings.
- Eliminate duplication of works and projects to ensure efficiency.

- Prioritize projects for effective and need-based implementation at the village level.
- Record the proceedings of Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha through videography to prevent manipulation at any stage.
- Secure active support from the local administration for the smooth conduct of these meetings.
- Provide adequate publicity in advance to maximize participation in Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha meetings.
- Frame the meeting agenda around issues directly related to the daily lives and concerns of villagers.

5. Findings & Conclusion

The study on *From Representation to Participation: Odisha's Governance Transformation through Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha* reveals that these institutions have performed a pivotal role in deepening grassroots democracy. While Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) provided a framework for representative democracy, the Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha have enabled direct community involvement in planning, implementation, and observing or monitoring of development programmes. The Gram Sabha Empowerment Programme of 2012 further revitalized their functioning by mobilizing communities, strengthening institutional capacities, and ensuring inclusivity. To achieve good leadership or good governance in the rural local areas of the State through the establishment of local self-government, it is necessary or essential to strengthen people's institutions such as the Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha. Proactive action must be carried out by the State Government to reinforce these bodies by devolving adequate powers to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), as envisioned in the Constitution. True empowerment of Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha lies in securing active involvement from each division/section of society, with particular emphasis on greater involvement of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women. The effectiveness of local self-governance depends largely on the awareness of the people regarding the role of these institutions in village development. Hence, the media, civil society organizations, government and members of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system must collectively work towards enhancing people's participation in Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha, thereby strengthening the foundations of grassroots democracy in Odisha. Key findings highlight that Gram Sabhas have enhanced transparency, accountability, and participatory planning, particularly in the selection of beneficiaries and approval of schemes. Efforts to involve marginalized or venerable groups, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), women, and other disadvantaged sections, have broadened inclusiveness. However, challenges such as low awareness, irregular meetings, lack of respect for Gram Sabha decisions, and inadequate devolution of power still limit their effectiveness.

In conclusion, Odisha's experience demonstrates that genuine participation at the village level strengthens local self-governance and makes governance more people-centric. Sustained awareness campaigns, capacity-building of PRIs, timely meetings, and respect for community decisions are essential to transform Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha into vibrant

instruments of participatory or deliberative democracy and good governance.

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