



Grama Sabha in Panchayat Raj System in Karnataka: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi believed that, democratic freedoms have to be founded in institutions of Self-government in every village in India. He drew his inspiration from the traditional Panchayats? 'village republics', which he called Panchayati Raj. He based his vision of contemporary democracy in independent India on genuine peoples' participation in the development and welfare of their own habitats through elected Panchayats. The Grama Sabha has been defined by the Constitution as a body consisting of all registered voters of a village within the area of a village Panchayat. Article 243A provides that a Gram Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a State may, by law, provide. 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.

KEYWORDS

Grama Sabha, Local Governance, Role of Grama Sabha, Participation through Information etc.,

Introduction

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution (1992) is a milestone in the evolution of Panchayats in India which carved out the third tier of the Indian Political System. While the Panchayats have been the backbone of Indian villages to achieve economic development and social justice in rural areas. Grama Sabha which is an entity of constitution of India is legitimized statutory body to do multifaced work at the village level.

The main objective of introducing Grama Sabha is to have decentralized planning and evaluation with peoples participation at the grass root level. The concept of eradication of discrimination and facilitation of peoples participation from all walks of social life in the management of affairs of their locality were the foundation for the emergence of comprehensive society called Grama Sabha. Transparency and intimacy becomes part and parcel of their institution. The realization that people's participation alone can bring sustainable development through good governance at the base level. Hence, it becomes inevitable that collective wisdom of Grama Sabha guides the Panchayati Raj Institutions in their planning and execution of developmental functions, social auditing as an integral part of Grama Sabha that ensures transparency in administration and accountability of Panchayati Raj Institutions. In Tamil Nadu Grama Sabha is described as "A body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised with in the area of Panchayat at the village level.

Local Governance in Karnataka

Karnataka has a fairly long and impressive history of decentralisation. It has century-old roots in policy decisions taken by the princely state of Mysore. As Manu Bhagavan (2003) has shown, the then Maharaja of Mysore, Krishnaraja Wadiyar, advised by his Diwan cum Chief Engineer M. Visweswaraiyah, instituted several initiatives to improve the quality of higher education in the state, with a particular emphasis on technology and the sciences. Additionally, in 1905, the Government of Mysore persuaded JN Tata to locate the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore subsidized by a land-grant, and an annual government subsidy of Rs.50,000.

Similarly, the Mysorean roots of panchayati raj go very deep. The historian Christopher Bayly (2006) has recently stated that the terms *panchayat* and "sabha" in the context of village institutions were first articulated by Ram Raz, based on his experience as a "native judge" in Mysore about 200 years ago. These were then adopted by North Indian writers and subsequently absorbed into the nationalist canon via Gandhiji's vigorous advocacy (Gandhi, 1962). "Modern" PRI reforms in Karnataka can be traced at least as far back as Krishnaraja Wadiyar's expansion of local self-government in 1902-03 which created 8 district and 77 taluk boards. Nataraj and Anantpur (2004) document the subsequent history of panchayat reforms in Karnataka. In 1918, the Mysore Local Board was passed the Village Panchayat Act, which provided for the election of half of the representatives in district and two-thirds in taluk boards respectively. In 1926, a two tier scheme with village panchayats and district boards was established, abolishing taluk boards, with both bodies provided with power and independent sources of revenue; and in the post independence period several acts and bills were passed culminating in the 1983.

A less well-known fact about Karnataka relates to its long experimentation with decentralisation. Attempts to devolve powers to local bodies had been initiated even before independence (Nataraj and AnanthPur, 2004). A serious effort to decentralise its political structures in Karnataka came about in the 1980s. The first major landmark in Karnataka was the 1983 Act, which introduced a two-tier, elected sub-state level governance structure. A notable feature was 25 per cent reservation for women in these bodies even before this was mandated by the Constitution. Elections under this Act were held in 1987. The 1983 Act was substituted by a new law in 1993 (the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993) to accommodate the mandatory provisions brought in by the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution. The 1993 Act provides for a three-tier structure – Zilla Panchayat (district level), Taluk Panchayat (Block level) and Gram Panchayat (village level).

Panchayati Raj is a system of governance in which Gram Panchayats are the basic units of administration. It has 3 levels: village, block and district. The Grama Sabha is the grass

root level democratic institution in each Village Panchayat. A vibrant Grama Sabha is essential for the effective functioning of Village Panchayats by promoting transparency and accountability in administration, enhancing public participation in the planning and implementation of schemes and in the choice of beneficiaries, and paving the way for social audit. The Government have ordered the conduct of Grama Sabha meetings a minimum of four times a year i.e. on 26th January, 1st May, 15th August and 2nd October. Government of India announced to observe 2009-10 as the Year of Gram Sabha and requested the states to conclude the activities undertaken during the Year of Gram Sabha, lessons learnt for the future functioning of Gram Sabha, honouring well functioning Gram Sabhas and Panchayat representatives who made special contribution, and other activities deemed important.

Role of Gram Sabha

The Gram Sabha has been defined by the Constitution as a body consisting of all registered voters of a village within the area of a village Panchayat. Article 243A provides that a Gram Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a State may, by law, provide. Powers assigned to the Gram Sabha, therefore, vary from State to State.

Gram Sabha forum has high potential for grounding democracy at the grassroots, facilitating socio-economic inclusion, participation in planning and implementation of development programmes and ensuring accountability of the Panchayat to the electors. But it is generally seen that meetings of the Gram Sabhas are not held regularly and are marked by thin attendance particularly of women and marginalized groups. There is little discussion on the proposals put forward for approval by the Panchayat. Issues of common interest and of the marginalized sections are often not discussed.

The general perception is that the task before the Gram Sabha is approval of the lists of beneficiaries, approval for issue of utilization certificates and passing of the annual accounts. Panchayat heads bring their own supporters and potential beneficiaries to attend the meetings so that while the quorum is completed, most of the other electors keep away. Hence, a sense of cynicism has developed about the efficacy of Gram Sabha meetings.

Participation through Information

Information is strongly associated with more active participation in gram panchayats and with more equitable service distribution. However, an ordinary villager has extremely limited access to information. For example, he or she is unlikely to know what the powers of the panchayat are, how Adhyaksha can be held accountable for misdeeds and how rights can be enforced. This information should be easily access to the people.

For the rural local governance to be effective, energizing Gram Sabhas is the real challenge. There is a need to evolve mechanisms for regular and meaningful meeting of the Gram Sabha, active participation of its members and monitoring its functioning. Before Conducting Gram Sabha Meetings, a notice about Gram Sabha Meeting must reach to the people at least 7 days in advance through written notices can be put in a public places, beating drums etc. This would more help in preparing for participation, if printed pamphlet to be distributed to each house contains main themes and agenda for the discussion in the meeting and publicity through local cable TV around the Gram Panchayats area. Place the notice boards in particular place of each block of the village so that people may get regular information about transparent activity of Gram Panchayat.

Education and access to information proved to be key correlates of higher levels of participation in the activities of Gram Panchayats. Increasing access to and use of education among the groups appears to be one of the most effective mid-term strategies for achieving better rates of inclusion.

Strategies need to be improved are:

Increased primary/upper-primary school availability and effectiveness for females, tribals and landless people.

Non-formal education opportunities which can be available at times which fit into adults work schedules.

Panchayat/local governance literacy drives which ensure participation of a representative cross-section of rural society.

Identifying the Beneficiaries

Gram Sabha of the village is mainly focus on Development, Monitoring and Management. It offers equal opportunity to all citizens to discuss and criticize, approve or reject proposals of the Gram Panchayat and also assess its performance. Prioritization of needs are to be done in a sequential manner where community needs are given highest preference, followed by that of poor households and finally the needs of other households are essential to taken into account. Gram Sabha has to take critical decision to identify and approve the list of beneficiaries for different Government schemes.

Poverty is usually thought of in terms related to wealth and income. However; such measures are rarely able to adequately reflect the struggle waged by many of the poor in securing their livelihood. The concept of vulnerability is used to assist in understanding the situations in which livelihood stability is frequently endangered. High levels of vulnerability are commonly associated with households that are defenceless against cyclical fluctuations in natural processes or unforeseen expenditures and where a modicum of physical security and adequate coping mechanisms are lacking.

The aim of development interventions is not only to reduce poverty by increasing income-earning capacity, but also to lessen vulnerability by reducing risk and uncertainty while strengthening the capacity of the poor to deal with fluctuations in their external environment. Both the wealth and vulnerability aspects of poverty should be considered while selecting the beneficiaries for different schemes.

Criterion of Poverty

To understand which households are classified as poor in terms of vulnerability, a ranking exercise may be used to identify the different socio-economic backgrounds.

Households who have problems managing their livelihoods or daily subsistence, or who have problems coping with any crisis such as drought, crop failure or the serious illness of a family member. Following this exercise, the respondents (head of the household) will ask to explain the indicators of vulnerability for the household categories: very vulnerable, vulnerable, livelihood secure, and very livelihood secure (Gardin, 1988).

While there is some commonality among the factors that cause households in the various localities to be either vulnerable or livelihood secure, it should be emphasized that the degree of vulnerability varies between the Panchayats depending on the larger livelihood context.

For example, a household considered to be very livelihood secure in Mysore taluk of South Karanataka, may be less livelihood secure in the context of agriculturally progressive in Gulbarga taluk of North Karanataka.

The indicators identify by the respondents for **very vulnerable** household includes:

Landless households that are dependent on daily wage labour.

Female-headed households without regular income and marginal land.

Those where most members migrate due to the scarcity or insufficient productivity of land.

Those where one of the main earners is physically or mentally disabled.

Those who lack family or extended kin. I elder households without sons who can or are willing to contribute economically and Large households with few working members, little productive land or any additional regular supplementary income.

Young people with less farming experience.

The indicators identify for the very livelihood secure households includes:

Those that had one or more members with income security from jobs with government or the private sector.

Those with large businesses or where at least one of the members was a shopkeeper. and Those households who had abundant irrigated productive land or had inherited property.

Some of the characteristics have to consider for classifying households as **vulnerable**.

New households who had lost access to productive assets as a result of property division, large households without enough earning members, female-headed household with productive land, young people with less farming experience, and Lack of supplementary income and little rain-fed land.

Livelihood secure households will identify as:

those who had productive land, had members who were self-employed or regularly employed, and Those with very productive land who had access to good irrigation sources.

Conclusion

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.

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