

Gram Sabha to Governance: Participation, Representation, and Local Decision-Making in Rural India

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Abstract: This paper looks at Gram Sabha as a changing institution of participatory democracy and decentralised governance in rural India. It uses interdisciplinary references and state-level experiences that are documented to analyse how the constitutional design, social hierarchies and administrative practices determine the shape of citizen participation, representation and impact on the local development decision-making. The research shows that although Gram Sabhas have great potential to increase transparency, limit elite capture and welfare targeting, their operation is unequal as they are characterised by caste and gender disparities, lack of information and institutional support. As the example of states like Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh shows, deliberative quality and accountability can be significantly enhanced by a proactive facilitation approach, participatory planning and social audits. The paper proposes that the way forward in revitalisation of Gram Sabhas is through reinforcing statutory powers, broadening transparency, and making long term investments in civic mobilisation. Through applying the theoretical insights within the context of the grounded policy analysis, the research highlights the pivotal role of Gram Sabhas as the places of promoting democratic deepening and equal rural development in India.

Keywords: Gram Sabha; Participatory Democracy; Decentralisation; Local Governance; Social Accountability.

JEL Codes: H75; O18; D72.

Introduction: Gram Sabhas and the Architecture of Local Governance in India

The Gram Sabha that is constitutionally conceived as the institution of decentralised governance represents the Indian experiment of direct, participative democracy

on village level. The Panchayati Raj as a three-tier system was institutionalised in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) and the Gram Sabha was given a crucial role in ensuring that not only is the governance representative but also deliberative and participatory. Decentralisation in India was meant not just to devolve administration responsibilities but also to democratise decision making process by instilling civic participation and accountability in the local institutions as postulated by scholars like Niraja Gopal Jayal (2006) and James Manor (2011).

It is thus made up of Gram Sabha, a special institutional innovation- one that introduces every adult villager into the field of governance. It has the responsibility of determining the priorities at the local level, reviewing the spending of the people, endorsing development projects, and holding the elected officials accountable. Ideally, it is used as a deliberative platform through which various social groups can strike a deal on the public good, challenge authority, and influence the course of rural development. According to Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006), such forums are necessary to minimise information asymmetry and to deter elite capture in order to enhance coordination of state programmes with the needs of the community.

However, the operations of Gram Sabhas in India show a high level of difference. Although some states such as Kerala and Karnataka have fostered strong participatory cultures and incorporated Gram Sabhas in local planning processes, numerous other areas are still grappling with poor motivations, low inclusiveness and flaws in processes. This contradiction highlights that the constitutional design, social structures, administrative capacity and political will interact in many complex ways.

It is against this background that the current paper explores the role of Gram Sabhas in enhancing participation, representation and local decision making in the decentralised governance system in India. The analysis relies on interdisciplinary literature and experience in state-level to examine how Gram Sabhas are working in reality, the issues they face and how they can be able to achieve their democratic and developmental potential. By doing that, the paper places Gram Sabha in a larger context of debate of democratic deepening, rural governance, and public accountability. It informs that although Gram Sabhas have great potential in terms of being sources of grassroots democracy, the potential should be translated into action by taking a long term process to manage social inequalities, strengthen the administrative support and to institutionalise the process of participation in the day to day operations of the rural administration.

Theoretical Framework: Decentralisation, Participatory Democracy, and Institutional Design

To understand the role of the Gram Sabha in the rural governance of India, it is important to base the analysis on wider theoretical discussions around the concept of decentralisation, participatory democracy and institutional design. The theory of decentralisation focuses on the handing over of authority, resources, and authority to make decisions to local institutions by higher level of government. But, as it is noted by Bardhan (2002) and Manor (1999), the effects of decentralisation cannot be considered only by the extent of formal devolution but also the quality of local institutions, the decentralisation of power within local communities, and the mechanisms that the citizens can use to exercise accountability. These are the dynamics that are core in the operation of Gram Sabhas, which are institutionalised areas of direct citizen participation.

The literature on participatory democracy also points to the relevance of deliberative forums as the means of improving the legitimacy and responsiveness of governance systems. Niraja Gopal Jayal (2006) and other scholars believe that participation should not be limited to voting but should be accompanied by voice, deliberation, and contestation all of which are entrenched in Gram Sabhas designs. The Gram Sabha therefore identifies with the greater normative ideal of enhancing democracy through availing to the citizens avenues of influencing decisions that directly impact their lives. This is echoed by Habermasian conceptions of the public where communicative practice among citizens can influence collective results—where deliberation again in the Indian case is embroiled in social inequalities in place.

Meanwhile, institutionalist approaches, especially Feminist Institutionalism and New Institutionalism, emphasise the importance of official regulations and unofficial norms in the operation of structures of governance. Bina Agarwal (2010) stresses that the gendered forms of power as well as patriarchal norms tend to dictate who is present and who has power in the local forums despite the legal requirements. On the same lines, Amita Baviskar (2005) illustrates that caste hierarchies and local political networks influence the allocation of voice and influence in the participatory institutions including Gram Sabhas. These observations indicate that decentralised institutions exist within existing power frameworks that may either promote or limit the inclusionary participation.

The issue of elite capture is also of interest to the theoretical literature; this is where local elites take control over the decision-making process, distort beneficiary list, or misappropriate the state resources. As Platteau and Gaspart (2003) and Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) demonstrate, high social inequality among communities or inadequate accountability systems render the communities to be highly susceptible to elite domination. It is the role of Gram Sabhas with their statutory mandate of approving development works as well as reviewing public expenditure to cheque such tendencies. Their effectiveness is however dependent on the level of transparency, civic mobilisation and support they get by the state.

Lastly, the social audit perspectives and public accountability offer a different perspective through which Gram Sabhas may be analysed. Jean Drèze and Rob Jenkins (2010) believe that institutional innovations like public hearings, social audits, and community monitoring can also be a great way of enhancing local accountability, particularly where they are entrenched in formal state governance. Gram Sabhas are an institutional space where such accountability practises can be implemented, so that citizens can challenge authorities, access documents and insist on redressing wrongs.

Combined, these theoretical approaches can help understand the various ways in which Gram Sabhas can help in enhancing decentralised governance: as deliberative spaces, as tools of accountability, as means of deepening democracies, as places of contestation of social hierarchies. They also point out the structural and institutional constraints which define their operations. This framework on analysis gives the understanding of how participation and representation transpire in Gram Sabhas which are discussed in the following section.

Institutional Mandate and Legal Framework of Gram Sabhas

Institutional power of the Gram Sabha is based on the vision of constitutional transformation inherent in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) that aimed at developing a democratic system of governance based on local involvement and transparency. The Gram Sabha, which is the organizing body of the Panchayati Raj system, carries with itself important statutory mandates touching on planning, supervision and accountability. However, how far these functions are reflected in practise differs substantially across states, due to the asymmetry of Indian federalism, and differences in political determination to decentralisation.

According to the constitutional amendment, the Gram Sabha is the gathering of all adult villagers or villagers in a village or group of villages. It has the mandate of approving annual plans and budgets, identification of beneficiaries to the welfare programs, monitoring of public works, and social audit of government schemes. The Eleventh Schedule also indicates 29 that can be devolved to Panchayats hence placing Gram Sabha as the most important deliberative body where citizens can affect the local governance. Mathew (1994) and Oommen (2005) posit that the framers had a vision of the Gram Sabha as means of bringing the government nearer to the citizens by directing democracy into the rural India.

Nevertheless, the real capacities of Gram Sabhas are moderated with state-level acts which has resulted in considerable disparity in their power and operations. Other states like Kerala, Karnataka and Rajasthan have passed rather strong clauses where Gram Sabhas have been given decisive powers in planning, budgeting and social audits. According to Kerala Panchayat Raj Act of Kerala, an example, the Gram Sabha has a clear role in the planning of local development, beneficiary selection and project prioritisation. Research by Isaac and Franke (2000) illustrates how these provisions facilitated the process of effective citizen participation in the People Plan Campaign where Gram Sabhas were the drivers of participatory planning.

Otherwise, certain states of the north and the central India have embraced weaker legislative provisions, restricting Gram Sabhas to advisory functions or formalities. According to Baviskar and Mathew (2009), the Panchayat Acts in most states do not enforce the Panchayat resolutions thus weakening their role in the actual governance decisions. Besides, lack of legal repercussions against non-compliance makes the elected officials circumvent Gram Sabha procedures or hold meetings simply to meet administrative obligations.

The legal system also has a vision of the Gram Sabha as a source of local accountability. In programmes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) the Gram Sabha is required to pass labour budgets, muster roll cheques and social audit. Drze and Khera (2011) state that these provisions have transformational potential in that they entrench transparency and citizen scrutiny in the formal governance process. Social audits being institutionalised in Andhra Pradesh under MGNREGA as a part of Gram Sabhas brought about a big change in the aspect of transparency and redressal of grievances.

However, the legal framework in itself is not enough to provide effective operation. Behar and Kumar (2002) as well as Rao and Singh (2005) highlight

that the law-provided authority is usually limited by administrative flaws such as poor distribution of notice, poor records-keeping, absence of facilitators, and poor deliberations preparation. Legal requirements therefore collide with administrative capability, political motivation as well as social backgrounds to influence real results.

Altogether, even though the constitutional and statutory framework sets a high normative ground to Gram Sabhas, their practical operation is characterised by high inter-state dispersion and institutional weakness. The legal mandate that the Gram Sabha has placed it as a deliberative, participatory, and accountability-focused institution, but in order to make it a reality, a political will, administrative support, and long-term civic participation are all that is needed. The following section expounds on this institutional background by analysing the process of participation and representation in the Gram Sabhas of various socio-political environments.

Participation and Representation in Gram Sabhas

The Gram Sabha is seen as a participatory area that involves rural citizens in direct deliberation, decision making and social accountability. However, the degree and quality of participation is influenced by closely knit socio-economic hierarchies, gender relations, local politics and administrative practises. It is repeatedly shown in the literature that, although the Gram Sabha provides an official means of everyone to engage in the process, the very process of exercising voice and influence reveals the larger power relations that are present in the rural population.

There is a considerable amount of literature pointing to the fact that caste and class hierarchy are major factors of participation and preference. Nirmala Buch (2003) notes that in most areas dominant-caste or economically advantaged groups usually dictate the agenda and the discussion and actively make the marginalised groups remain silent or not contribute meaningfully to the debate. Amita Baviskar (2005) also believes that the Gram Sabha tends to recreate the hierarchical social relations, which means that Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and landless labourers are unable to express their interests even during meetings. Such results emphasize the continuity of the so-called elite capture where local elites dominate the decision-making process in the community despite the formal inclusiveness.

The other structural barrier is gendered patterns of participation. Although the 73rd Amendment established a reservation system to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, the presence of women in Gram Sabhas does not necessarily result in substantive representation. According to Bina Agarwal (2010), intra-household

inequalities, gender division of labour and social norms limiting the mobility of women tend to inhibit the full participation of women. Niraja Gopal Jayal (2006) goes on to suggest that to be an effective participant, it is not enough to attend but to speak, challenge and manipulate outcomes - areas where women often face opposition or even rejection. Empirical research conducted in the northern Indian states reveals that women tend to sit differently, they are silent, or they submit to male members of the family when making decisions, which depicts how patriarchal norms influence the participatory behaviour.

In addition to gender and caste, regional and administrative differences also play a role in the participation. The experience of Kerala during the People's Plan Campaign has shown how preparatory mobilisation, meetings at the neighbourhood level, and trained facilitators can contribute greatly towards inclusiveness and quality of the deliberations of the Gram Sabha. The result of these interventions as recorded by Isaacs and Franke (2000) was more women, SC/STs and under-represented households participation. The process of decentralisation in planning in Karnataka and the participatory campaigns in Rajasthan also indicate that active state assistance can advance into Gram Sabhas to lively democracy forums. Conversely, states that have less institutional aids tend to experience low attendance, haphazard meetings, and little deliberation, which is the indication of weak political commitment to decentralisation (Oommen, 2005).

Access to information is also important in meaningful representation as a key to informed decision-making. According to Behar and Kumar (2002), the lack of substantive engagement by the citizens is a result of information asymmetry which is based on ineffective distribution of the budgets, programmes guidelines, or a list of the beneficiaries. Deliberations become symbolic and not substantive when the people in the village do not understand the schemes or expenditures available. On the other hand, public reading of records, display boards or pre-meeting information sessions practises have been found to improve the representational quality of Gram Sabhas by mitigating the informational barriers.

Lastly, the presence of facilitative structures is the determinant in the functionality of Gram Sabha as a representative organization. The use of trained facilitators, required quorums of marginalised groups, designed deliberation formats, and mobilisation activities within communities can all have a substantial positive effect on the results of participation. As the success of social audits within MGNREGA, specifically in Andhra Pradesh demonstrates, the institutionalised

facilitation process, coupled with public hearings, allows even less privileged citizens to challenge officials, investigate documentation and seek redressal (Drèze, 2010). The experiences show that the representational possibilities of the Gram Sabha are likely to be optimised in case the participatory processes are actively facilitated as opposed to evolve on their own.

On the whole, the active and passive inclusion and representation in Gram Sabhas are formed as the result of the active interaction of social hierarchies, gender norms, administrative structure, and political interests. Although the constitutional system provides a formal basis of inclusive participation, substantive representation needs to bridge the deep inequalities that exists by engaging in sustained mobilisation, transparency and institutional support. It is on these dynamics that the analysis of the impact of Gram Sabhas on the local planning and development decisions has been based- a question that will be dealt with in the following part.

Local Decision-Making and Development Outcomes

The Gram Sabha has a central role in the development of local development patterns because it is the main institutional tool that citizens are involved in the process of determining priorities, resource allocation, and monitoring of public programmes. Its mandate does not limit itself to formal consultation but substantive involvement with planning, implementation and monitoring, which makes it a key aspect of the democratic decentralisation project. The extent to which Gram Sabhas can affect the result of development, however, is dependent on the efficiency of deliberation, the inclusiveness of participation and responsiveness of administrative systems.

There is an overall tendency to believe the role of gram sabhas in enhancing targeting and priority-setting in development programmes with reference to increased literature in academic circles to support the importance of gram sabhas in development programmes. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) state that participatory mechanisms decrease information asymmetry between citizens and local governments resulting in a more effective identification of beneficiaries and more equitable distribution of resources. Gram Sabha resolutions are more likely to be more representative of the needs of the locals than the top-down planning when citizens are talking about the lack of development, drinking water, connectivity by road, or livelihood issues. The experience at Kerala shows that participatory setting of priorities of development during the People Plan Campaign resulted in massive investments in the social areas, including health and education (Isaac and Franke, 2000).

Gram Sabha also determines the outcome of development by participating in the planning process especially in the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) framework. The GPDP requires organised community involvement in the process of needs assessment and project prioritisation. The GPDP process when properly applied makes planning grounded in local realities and increases transparency. States like Karnataka and Maharashtra have demonstrated that pre-GPDP consultation, micro level data collection and structured participatory rural appraisal (PRA) exercises have a major positive impact on the quality of plans and that resources are made to flow towards development gaps which are urgent. These experiences prove the possibilities of Gram Sabhas as an agent of evidence-based and community-specific planning.

The other important role of the Gram Sabha is enhancing the accountability and oversight mechanisms. Jean Drèze (2010) points to the revolutionary nature of social audits, which are a part of Gram Sabha meetings, and which contribute to the increase in transparency of public programmes, especially MGNREGA. Published checking of muster sheets, spending documents and worksite records minimises leakages and demands authorities to account on their actions. The Andhra Pradesh model of social audits will explain how the Gram Sabha led audit can unravel malpractices, reclaim funds, and influence the citizens to take corrective measures. These accountability systems play a direct role in facilitating better implementation of the programmes and efficient use of the state resources.

The Gram Sabha also plays an equally significant role in distributional politics of welfare schemes. Research by Chathukulam and John (2007) and Mathew (2000) shows that where Gram Sabhas are proactive in examining lists of beneficiaries of schemes like the housing scheme, pensions, or livelihood programmes, the selection process would be more transparent and fair. Gram Sabhas minimize the possibilities of nepotism, clientelism, and elite takeover by offering a transparent platform through which decisions will be questioned and amended. This participatory scrutiny makes the welfare allocation process more equitable and it builds confidence on the local administration structures.

Nevertheless, the impact of Gram Sabhas on the outcomes of development is disproportionate by state and region. Civic mobilisation, political commitment and administrative support have been strong in some places like Kerala, Karnataka and some parts of Rajasthan where project selection, public expenditure and monitoring processes are still often affected by Gram Sabhas. On the other hand, in states

that have less institutional support, Gram Sabhas can be held infrequently, in low attendance, or as mere formalities of the procedure that have little effect on the budget. According to Oommen (2005), in such situations, Gram Sabha solutions can be ignored or avoided, which restricts their participation in local development.

Nonetheless, the overall evidence is that Gram Sabhas when well institutionalised can help in improving the responsiveness, transparency, and accountability of local governance. They bring development planning to meet the requirements of the community, minimise leakages, enhance control systems, and balance elite dominance. By so doing, Gram Sabhas represent the democratic possibilities of the decentralised governance system, connecting the local decision-making to better developmental performance and more fair distribution of the common good.

These donations shape the foundation of realising the structural limitations that still hinder the maximum potential of Gram Sabha- an issue that will be discussed in the subsequent section.

Challenges and Structural Constraints

Despite their constitutional eminence, Gram Sabhas in India are still faced with a set of structural, socio-political and administrative issues that still restrict their capacity to perform as effective institutions of participatory democracy. These limitations, which are broadly reported in the literature on decentralisation, account for the fact that the normative image of empowered Gram Sabhas and their unequal performance remain unmatched. These limitations must be understood in order to diagnose why participatory governance can work in certain areas and fail in others.

One of the major limitations is associated with the deeply-rooted social hierarchies that influence the power relations in the rural areas. Nirmala Buch (2003) and Amita Baviskar (2005) demonstrate that dominance of caste and classes affects the meeting participants, speakers, and whose preferences determine the decisions. In most states in the north and central India, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and landless households are subject to implicit exclusionary measures, such as seating during meetings, agenda setting, and the manner in which it is presented, which limit their ability to do so. These dynamics support what Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) call the process of elite capture in which local elites have disproportionate representation in deliberation and resource allocation.

Another significant obstacle is the gendered inequalities. Despite the Panchayati Raj Institutions having one-third of all elected positions allocated to women, the

women still have low participation in Gram Sabhas due to patriarchal practise, restrictions of movement and information. As noted by Bina Agarwal (2010), the intra-household power relations influence how women engage in participation as women are greatly mediated by their male relatives to make decisions on whether or not to attend meetings, speak in public or challenge authority. Niraja Gopal Jayal (2006) stresses that democratic participation should be perceived not only in terms of physical presence but of effective voice - the situation which is hardly possible in highly patriarchal society. Such limitations decrease the representation of women as substantive decision-makers.

Gram Sabhas also have administrative and procedural weaknesses that hamper their operations. According to Behar and Kumar (2002), meetings are often assembled without proper prior notice, preparation documentation or even trained facilitators. Deliberation is further undermined by poor record-keeping, inaccessible venues and not having structured agendas. Most states have administrative personnel who are overwhelmed, untrained, lack awareness of statutory requirements and hence poorly organised meetings with minimal space to have meaningful discussions with citizens. These shortcomings undermine citizen confidence and confirm the views that Gram Sabhas are more of a form than of substance.

Information asymmetry is another important obstacle that destroys transparency and meaningful deliberation. Citizens cannot make informed decisions or hold the representatives accountable without having access to clear information on budgets, welfare schemes, project proposals, or expenditure patterns. According to Rao and Singh (2005), decentralised governance entails strong information flows, which are weak in case deliberative capacity is weak. The lists of beneficiaries, the documents of the project, and the financial statements are not published in advance in many states, and citizens have limited knowledge when discussing them.

Gram Sabhas are also influenced by political and institutional influences. According to Oommen (2005), in India, decentralisation is highly asymmetrical as the state governments differ in their political dedication to the concept of grassroots democracy. In certain areas, the local elites or political intermediaries will actively work to deter wide participation lest their influence be diluted. Leaders of panchayats can use Gram Sabhas as compliance cheques but not as platforms of consultation especially where state control is lax or the resolutions by Gram Sabhas are not enforceable in law. These political disincentives undermine institutional power of Gram Sabha.

Economic precarity is also a factor to participation, particularly to the rural poor. Small farmers, migrant households and daily wage labourers are usually unable to spend several hours in meetings especially when the meetings fall during working hours or agricultural seasons. This leads to participation which is biased in terms of classes with the most dependent on the services of the public being the least able to participate in formulating the services. These gaps in participation are further increased by the uneven distribution of civil society organisations or community mobilisation activities.

Lastly, capacity weaknesses (institutional and civic) restrain the functionality of the Gram Sabha. Not all the citizens are informed about their rights, functions of the Gram Sabha or the information about public schemes. James Manor (2011) believes that participatory institutions should be constantly educated and mobilised; otherwise, meetings become routine, unattended, and controlled by a handful of people. Likewise, local governments tend to be under-equipped and under-trained to support the high-quality deliberations, which leads to the continued disparity in states.

Collectively, these restrictions depict that Gram Sabhas exist in complicated social and political ecologies that significantly influence their operations. Although the legal system is designed to create a vibrant, inclusive, and responsible institution, to achieve such a vision, the process of breaking the social hierarchies, reinforcing the administrative systems, promoting transparency, and developing the civic capacities have to be sustained. These institutional problems constitute the context behind the consideration of policy interventions to empower Gram Sabhas- to be discussed in the next section.

Policy Pathways for Strengthening Gram Sabhas

To build up Gram Sabha as an institution of participatory democracy, there is a complex of policy interventions to integrate structural inequalities, administrative deficits, information gaps and weak institutional authority. According to the literature on decentralisation, there is always the notion that participatory governance is not an organic occurrence but the result of a planned institutional design, political will and years of sustained civic mobilisation. Policy paths should therefore aim at the establishment of facilitating situations in which Gram Sabhas may be good, inclusive and accountable sources of local government.

One of the priorities is the increase in the statutory authority and enforceability of Gram Sabha decisions. In most of the states, Gram Sabha resolutions are not legally

enforceable and elected representatives or bureaucratic actors may circumvent the community preferences. According to Oommen (2005), decentralisation can only be meaningful when the participatory bodies are seen to be having real power of making decisions. States like Kerala and Karnataka have shown that where Gram Sabhas have to ratify local schemes, budgets and lists of beneficiaries and where exceptions have to be explained, deliberation and accountability are much better. Enhancing the law to require Gram Sabha approvals on major governance functions would help to enhance institutional credibility and bring more people in.

It is also crucial to strengthen administrative support systems which are rather unequal in different states. According to research conducted by Behar and Kumar (2002) it was established that there is a strong correlation between the procedural quality of the meetings of Gram Sabha and the administrative facilitation; administrative facilitation is linked with the provision of sufficient notice, records, clear agendas, and documentation of the meeting. Facilitation teams at the block or panchayat level can be institutionalised by the states and charged with the role of mobilising citizens, creating user-friendly materials, and facilitating deliberation. The example of Kerala (pre-GPDP ward sabhas) or Rajasthan (Jan Samvad (public dialogue)) model of administrative investment demonstrates that the level of engagement and deliberation can be substantially enhanced.

It is necessary to strengthen the transparency and information dissemination to provide informed participation. According to Rao and Singh (2005), participatory governance entails the citizens having access to the budgets, expenditure statements, project proposals, and government guidelines on time. Information asymmetry can be curbed by institutionalising mandatory disclosure norms, i.e. notice boards, digital panchayat portals, wall writings and pre-meeting information sessions. Other states like Andhra Pradesh have shown that with information being actively disseminated, citizens will find it easier to participate in social audit and beneficiary selection, which can minimise the possibilities of elite capture.

Specific measures are also needed to increase social inclusion and gender equality in Gram Sabhas. Based on the findings of Agarwal (2010) and Jayal (2006), policies should go beyond formal reservations to be able to address structural barriers to women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other marginalised communities. The substantive representation can be greatly improved through women-only pre-meetings, use of trained female resource persons, mandatory quotas in quorum requirements, and scheduling of meetings to be conducted at

times when women can be present. The principles of social inclusion that have been implemented successfully in such programmes as MGNREGA can be applied to all the processes concerning Gram Sabhas.

The other important route is the capacity-building and the civic education. Manor (2011) posits that participatory institutions need constant nurturing such as investing in awareness of the citizens and development of leaders. The deliberative capacity can be enhanced through structured training programmes to the community members on the functions of Gram Sabha, rights and entitlements, planning tools, and accountability mechanisms. Intermediaries in the maintenance of mobilisation and monitoring implementation can be civil society organisations, self-help groups, farmer collectives, and youth clubs.

It is also important to make Gram Sabhas more integrated in the local development planning. Despite the fact that the GPDP framework requires participatory planning, its effectiveness is determined by the regular and substantial integration of the inputs of Gram Sabha. States must embrace common participatory means, in the form of PRA exercises, village development profiles, and household surveys, to make sure that planning is based on real needs. The example of Kerala with the People plan and Karnataka with the decentralised planning processes show how well-organised participatory systems can make the Gram Sabha a more powerful agent in determining the priorities of the development process.

Lastly, Gram Sabha effectiveness can be greatly boosted by institutionalising strong accountability mechanisms especially social audits. According to Drèze (2010) and Jenkins (2007), social audits that are carried out in a transparent manner, in front of the people and facilitated by an independent person give citizens the power to question how their money is spent and also uncover abnormalities. Downward accountability can be enhanced by institutionalising periodic social audit cycles within programmes, third party facilitation and by compelling the public to take action reports, which help to build citizen trust.

Combined, these policy channels help to highlight the fact that building capacity in Gram Sabhas necessitates an integrated ecosystem environment, which includes empowering citizens, empowering administrators, promoting transparency, and integrating active deliberation into the daily operations of rural governance. These reforms are the key towards the achievement of the democratic potential of Gram Sabhas and their further contribution to the equitable and accountable

rural development. This wider meaning is considered in the conclusion section and outlines future pathways to enhancing Gram Sabha-led governance.

Conclusion

The Gram Sabha is the centre of the India democratic decentralisation project which is ambitious in its vision of enhancing democracy by involving citizens in the decision-making process, deliberation, and accountability. As depicted in this paper, Gram Sabha is not only a body that exists in statute but a very critical point at which the state and the citizenry bargain on priorities, keep a cheque on the citizens and influence the course of the rural development. The institutional vision laid down in the 73 rd Amendment of the constitution positions the Gram Sabha at the centre of the local self-governance, but realisation of the vision is diverse throughout the socio-political environment of India.

The discussion between sections brings out one trend namely that the efficacy of the Gram Sabha is inherently predetermined by the interplay of social classes, administrative capabilities, political motivation as well as civic movement. Although other states like Kerala and Karnataka demonstrate how enabling institutional design, participatory frameworks of planning and long-term mobilisation can turn Gram Sabhas into vibrant democratic spaces, other regions are still struggling with low turnout, elite capture, gendered exclusions, and procedural weaknesses. These differences confirm the results of Jayal (2006) and Manor (2011), who argue that decentralisation is strongly affected by local settings, and that participatory institutions can only be valuable in the presence of enabling structures and democratic cultures.

Concurrently, the evidence proves that the functioning of Gram Sabhas, in case of its successful operation, contributes to the improvement of the quality of governance to a considerable extent. They enhance the targeting of welfare schemes, promote transparency in the use of public funds, promote accountability through social audits, and make development planning and the realities in rural communities to match. In this respect, the Gram Sabha serves as a cheque to the top-down planning and as a driving force of inclusive development. The records of Drreze (2010), Isaac and Franke (2000) and Chathukulam and John (2007), highlight the transformational capacity of the empowered Gram Sabhas in enhancing responsive and fair governance.

However, this possibility is not even and frequently not realised. The above structural limitations as revealed in this paper including caste-based hierarchies

and patriarchal norms, deficiency of administration and lack of strong statutory power all reveal that legal requirements are not enough to bring about participatory democracy of vibrancy. Enhancing Gram Sabhas needs to be a part of the planned policy, with better legal enforceability, state facilitation, enhanced transparency, selective inclusion, and capacity building. In the absence of such systemic interventions, Gram Sabhas are likely to be diminished into ritualised platforms that can only be used to satisfy compliance needs as opposed to being instruments of democratic deepening.

The policy directions in Section VII thus underline the necessity of a holistic, ecosystem-based strategy towards empowering Gram Sabhas, a strategy that combines institutional change with civic education, administrative investment and social inclusion. This is in line with the changing development priorities of India such as rural transformation, reforms in welfare delivery and decentralised planning frameworks such as GPDP.

Finally, the paper proposes that the revitalisation of Gram Sabhas is not only necessary to enhance local development performance but also to enhance democracy in India. With the nation struggling to overcome increasing socio-economic disparities, accountability demands, and governance system pressure, the Gram Sabha provides a singularly based and constitutionally required platform of democratic participation. It is important in that it has a potential of changing the governance in the rural areas by promoting deliberation, giving voice to the marginalised and creating a participatory ethos to go beyond procedural democracy.

To realise this potential, long term political commitment, institutional innovation and civic engagement are necessary. However, when empowered in a meaningful way, the Gram Sabha may still be the foundation of participatory governance - making democracy rooted in the daily village life and making the future of development in India grow out of the grass roots.

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