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**Strengthening of Gram Sabha
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By

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Concept of Gram Sabha

Gram Sabha (GS) is the centre of democratic power in the village and is the centre of activity. The basic philosophy in the concept of Gram Sabha is villagers as a collective body to discuss, decide holistically about the village issues, problems. problems of particular groups etc. Gram Sabha based comprehensive planning to be the basis of self-governance. Unfortunately many state governments dictate the terms of Gram Sabha and limit the scope of Gram Sabha to identification of beneficiaries of few schemes or implementation of Employment, Guarantee schemes (EEGs) JURY. (Panchayat bodies including Gram Sabhas should not be allowed to become the third tier of development administration.

"Gram Sabha" is a formally constituted body under the law which comprises all those on the voters list of the habitations comprising the village as formally defined. Since the 'village' is defined with reference to the need of spatial planning and civic administration, it is usually a conglomeration of a number of natural villages, each 01 which may be a community 'Gram Sabha' in common parlance comprises. Village : community. However, in practical terms, each word of Gram Panchayat should constitute a Gram Sabha. Then all these word level Gram Sabha should constitute the Gram Panchayat\ level Gram Sabha.

Relationship among the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat.

The "Gram Sabha" comprises the people, while Panchayats comprise their representatives. A functioning Gram Sabha is an institution of Participatory Democracy" while "Gram Panchayat (GP) is a body comprise only elected members is an institution of Representative Democracy. These are two entirely different things. We are experiencing the shortcomings of representative democracy. Therefore, participatory process should be strengthened, so that common people can participate in the process of their development

Functions of Gram Sabhas

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment clearly stated about the establishments of Gram Sabha at the village level consisting of people registered in the electoral roll relating to a village falling within the area of Panchayat, Then left to the State Government (as discretionary provisions) about the specific power and functions of Gram Sabha.

Most of the State Governments provisions relating to Gram Sabhas shows that Gram Sabha will be organised two or four times in a year, The power and functions are as follows:

1. The GS shall consider the following matters and make recommendations and suggestions to the Gram Panchayat. (Following matters varies from state to state).
2. The GS at its meeting shall consider the following
3. The GS shall Consider the Accounts of the preceding financial year
4. The GS shall finalise the selection of beneficiaries in order of priority under various programmes of the government. (Therefore the role is only to select the beneficiaries of the already identified government programmes and schemes).
5. The GP shall give due consideration to the recommendations and suggestions of the Gram Sabha.

In addition to the above in many state acts, following functions are also given to the Gram Sabhas:

- I. Mobilising voluntary labour and contributions in kind and cash for the community welfare programme.

2. Identification of beneficiaries for the implementation of developmental schemes pertaining to the village.
3. Rendering assistance in the implementation of developmental schemes pertaining to the village.

These functions are related to implementation support to the planned programmes.

Functions of Gram Sabha in the Scheduled Areas

While endowing Panchayats in the Scheduled Areas with such powers and authority as may be necessary can enable them to function as institutions of self-government, a State Legislature shall ensure that the Panchayats at the appropriate level and the Gram Sabha are endowed specifically with:

- i) the power to enforce prohibition or to regulate or restrict the sale and consumption of any intoxicant;
- (ii) the ownership of minor forest produce;
- (iii) the power to prevent alienation of land in the Scheduled Areas and to take appropriate action to restore any unlawfully alienated land of a Scheduled Tribe;
- (iv) the power to manage village markets by whatever name called;
- (v) the power to exercise control over money lending to the Scheduled Tribes;
- (vi) the power to exercise control over institutions and functionaries in all social sectors;
- (vii) the power to control over local plans and resources for such plans including tribal sub-plans;

The State legislations that may endow Panchayats with powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government shall contain safeguards to ensure that Panchayat at the higher level do not assume the powers and authority of any Panchayats at the lower level or of the Gram Sabha.

Therefore, it is clear that except in the Fifth Scheduled Areas, GS does not have much role and responsibilities.

Many a times people feel frustrated that decisions taken at the GS are not being implemented due to lack of support from the top. Higher level of Panchayat bodies should accept the Gram Sabha recommendations and extend support for its implementation. Similar role should also be played by respective government departments,

Issues of Concerns

- Gram Sabhas are not being held if held it is ritualistic.
- Decisions in Gram Sabhas are not being followed, led to frustration.
- Lack of information. Awareness among the people in general and Gram Panchayat members (Sarpanch/Pradhan) in particular.
- Government legislation are nor supportive to Gram Sabhas.

Reasons for the non-functioning of Gram Sabha

- People are not aware about the significance of Gram Sabha. Sarpanches are not taking sincere initiative to organise Gram Sabha
- Though in many places young Sarpanches are interested in Gram Sabha but their Secretaries normally discourage them to do so.
- Panchayat officials are satisfied with paper Work.
- Sarpanches generally avoid to meet people in a village meeting because they do not want to share informations and seek people's participation in discussion and decision making.
- People are generally unhappy with the performance of their Panchayat representatives.
- People are not adequately informed, aware.
- 'Gram Sabha' is not a powerful body. The plans suggested by Gram Sabha are not supported by higher body. They dictate terms. This create frustration (In Rajasthan participation in Gram Sabha meeting during 1995-96 was quite high, subsequently. it comes down when villagers noticed that their suggestions, decisions are not hardly implemented).
- Barring a few, no State Government give recognition to Gram Sabha in their Act. It remain as a consultative body, Advisory body.

Practical problems

- For bigger size Panchayats, participation of distant villages (which often at a distance of 5 Kms.) is very difficult due to distance.
- Poor people fear a day's job loss without any benefit.
- Middle class people (who are not under B PL group] look it that it is mainly for BPL people.
- Procedures for planning, coordinating, follow up of Gram Sabha is improper.
- Lack of resources, financial support frustrates the people.
- Time of the meeting (prevailing socio-cultural practices) in many situation restrict people parricipa1ion.

Successful Working of Gram Sabhas

However. many voluntary development organisations are actively working towards strengthening of Gram Sabhas which in turn strengthen the Gram Panchayats (PRIs). The following case study bring out some Critical Success Factors (CSF). These are:

1. Supportive Government policies, systems and procedures. Legislation alone is not the key to development, it needs to be backed by enabling policy decision.
2. Supportive and facilitative attitude of the government staff (along with Teacher, Panchayat Secretary, Health Workers) influence the Panchayat functioning.
3. A strategic focus of sensitisation training of field based staff at all levels will create more favourable conditions for Panchayats to perform more effectively.

4. Access to information about various government policies (procedures, programmes, schemes etc.) to PRI and community members and experience of other similar positive initiatives.
5. Positive linkage with PRI and community, community groups like youth, women, teachers, parents, farmers etc.
- 6: Participation of people along with partnership approach.
7. Local participation is managed more effectively if local leadership (awareness and skill) is available as in the case of Jamunia Tank: high awareness level of PRIs and current development programmes, abreast of Panchayat needs, ability to mobilise people working in close relationship with other Panch leaders, building close relationship with block, district administration, good support with Panchayat Secretary, resolving disputes of the Panchayat, good communication skills, ability to accomplish things etc.

Participation of Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha in Development (A Case Study)

The 73rd amendment has institutionalised the commitment to participation by giving legal status to the Gram Panchayat and the Gram Sabha consisting of all adult voters. It has legally entrusted the Panchayat with the function of formulating their development plans. The Madhya Pradesh Act has specifically made it mandatory for convening Gram Sabhas four times in a year. The Gram Sabha thus provides a legal platform where members of the community adult come and participate in discussions/debates concerning the development initiatives of the village. The decision taken by the Gram Sabha as per the Madhya Pradesh Act is mandatory.

In early 1996 a local Voluntary Development Organisation (VDO) SAMARTHAN in collaboration with PRIA decided to work intensively in a few Gram Panchayats to strengthen the PRIs with the following objectives:

1. To promote people centred process
 - To promote peoples participation and involvement in decision making
 - Decision making at the Gram Sabha in a collective way
2. Linkage with government (build collaborative partnership for Panchayat development)
3. Promote effective women's leadership

Initially the Voluntary Development Organisation (VDO) decided to work in Jamunia Tank with the following strategy.

- To carry out a micro-planning exercise in the Panchayat involving all the stakeholders.
- This process done in a participatory manner will ensure involvement of various sections of the community and major responsibility will be with the elected representatives.
- Process of planning as an intervention to increase Gram Sabha participation (emphasis on women and marginalised groups).
- Planning as an exercise for resource mobilisation (internal and external) and allocation.
- Develop leadership among the Panchayat members
- Develop partnership with others, like government, NGO, CBOs etc.
- Evolve systems, procedures based on practice and experience.

Jamunia Tank Gram Panchayat is a reserved Panchayat for backward class. It has a female Sarpanch belonging to the backward class, and twelve Panches who represent twelve wards of the Panchayat. This

Panchayat was primarily chosen because various micro level positive initiatives undertaken by the community have been accomplished and some are currently underway.

The infrastructure of the Panchayat includes a primary school, telephone exchange and child care centre. The main communities living here are called the Mewada, Meena, Khali, Rathore, Aggarwal, Pandit, Gosaii, Harijan, Balia, Bangi, Prajapati, Kumhar Tyagi.

Participation in Development

Construction of Village Drain:

The need for construction of a village drain in Jamunia Tank which was articulated by the community many times in the Panchayat meetings. The estimated budget for the construction of the drain was worked out to be Rs.93,000/- by the community and Panchayat leaders in the Panchayat meetings. The community volunteered to contribute Rs.50,000/- for its construction. This money was collected proportionately on the basis of land holdings and the poor contributed by providing labour. The remaining Rs.50,000/- was sanctioned by the district office under one of the district employment scheme.

Participation in Education

Process of implementation in Jamunia Tank Gram Panchayat

- The Headmaster of the village school was involved in surveying the Panchayat, His survey revealed 223 adult illiterates in October, 1996.
- Forty literate people were identified who volunteered to teach five illiterate adults each.
- It was decided to hold the classes between 5 P.M. to 10 P.M.
- The NGO working in the Panchayat was instrumental in motivating people to attend the classes. The NGO mobilised a group of youth and elderly people who went from house to house encouraging people to attend classes.
- The Sarpanch along with other literate women of the Panchayat organised a door to door campaign encouraging women to attend classes. As a part of the campaign motivational songs related to literacy were sung.
- Such mobilising techniques were continued for 20 days and surprise visits by the TLC officials and the NGO were conducted during the night to monitor the progress of the people.
- Meetings were organised periodically for rejuvenating such campaigns for motivating and monitoring

At the end of the three months an evaluation of the illiterate people was undertaken. On the basis of this evaluation the Panchayat was able to achieve their target of the adult literacy programme.

Ability to negotiate:

Active involvement in the process has increased the confidence and negotiation power of the Panchayat members as in the case of the women Sarpanch of Jamunia Tank Panchayat who along with the Headmaster, demanded the facility of middle school in duration which commenced in her Panchayat. As the school building belongs to the Panchayat, they threatened to disallow the government to run the school till the fifth class unless middle school was provided. Their demand was met by the district authorities resulting in a functional middle school (till standard VIII) in their Panchayat.

Participation to Gram Sabha Meetings: The people are informed beforehand about the date and venue of the meeting by making public announcements in the village. Proceedings of the meeting get recorded by the Panchayat Secretary who is a government official.

Gram Panchayat (GP) Meetings

These are meetings conducted every month and are attended by the Panchayat members, Panchayat Secretary and chaired by the Sarpanch. The issues discussed are usually pertaining to the development plans of the villages and issues to be placed before people in the Gram Sabha meeting. The proceedings of the meeting are recorded by the Panchayat Secretary. The Panchayat members are individually informed about the meeting by the 'Chowkidar' who gets the notification signed by them prior to the meeting. The meetings are usually held in the Panchayat Ghar. Sometimes the meetings are also attended by community members (as in Jamunia Tank Panchayat),

Participation in informal meetings:

The Gram Sabha and the elected members were also actively participating in informal meetings. Such meetings were mostly for planning of the development work to be organised in the Panchayats. In Jamunia Tank Gram Panchayat innumerable informal meetings where the community was more actively involved were conducted. Participation in these informal meeting is more. During June 1996 to February 1998. 11 such meetings were organised. In Raipura such meetings were almost minimal, the participation of community in informal meetings was almost absent.

Participation of Women:

The two case studies reflect that the participation of women leaders in Jamunia Tank Panchayat (Table-5) was remarkable as compared to Raipura Panchayat. The Sarpanch of Jamunia Panchayat is a woman who took active part in the development process of the Panchayat. In Raipura Panchayat the participation of women Panchayat members in both GS and GP meetings was nothing significant. Out of 4 women Panches, usually less than 50% attended the meetings. The reason for such a difference in the women leadership in the two Panchayats could be that in Jamunia, the Sarpanch being a woman has been able to mobilise the woman Panches which is not the case with Raipura.

Output

1. Higher participation in Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings.
2. Relevant discussion at the meetings. The main issues that are discussed in the meetings are as follows:

Problems faced by the community, how to address that problem like the communication problems during rainy season in the village, problems of poor elderly people. problems of daily wage earners, homeless people, irrigation. crop damage, crop loan etc. Discussions are also centred around how to address these problems, and find appropriate solutions. Common citizens as members of Gram Sabha are allowed to amend Panchayat meeting in Jamunia Tank. They discuss and plan for contribution, select beneficiaries of government schemes based upon discussion and needs of the person/family concerned.
3. Change in system and procedures at the government level. (District Collector along with NGO and other government staff evolved the following systems and procedures for effective government functioning):
 - i. Plan and ensure cluster (5 Gram Panchayats) level meetings where all the Panchayat level members and government functionaries attend. discuss and decide on various issues.
 - ii. Decided and fixed dates for fortnightly Panchayat meetings so that local staff like RI, VLW, VAW, Health Worker, Anganwari Worker etc. who are looking after 4-5 GPs can attend the GP meetings.
 - iii. Instruct the above staff to work with GO. Follow up the decisions and report the action taken on the decision.
 - iv. Collector wrote an open letter to all Sarpanches in the district about various available government schemes. eligibility criteria. how and whom to approach etc. as result the budget for social welfare related schemes like welfare for the poor. maternity benefits. stipend for poor and meritorious students housing: for the homeless etc. utilised. Panchayat selected the right persons for these schemes.

- v. At the district and block level. instructions were given to all relevant officials to attend GS meeting even if it is held in the evening or night, In many villages people find evening/night time more convenient for Gram Sabha meeting.
- vi. Collector along with other staff spent time in the villages. They visited Jamunia and Raipura villages many times.
- vii. Block Development Officer and other staff have become quite supportive. This is evident with their visit, intervention on with Panchayat members or' Jamunia Tank and to some extent Raipura, Prior to this effort. Visits by the officials to Jamunia Tank was very infrequent but now they frequently visit the area and even send other staff to visit this Panchayat.

4. Participation and contribution for development in education and infrastructure development study and analysis of health infrastructure.

Critical Success Factors (CSFs)

1. Supportive Government policies, systems and procedures. Legislation alone is not the key to development. it needs to be backed by enabling policy decision.
2. Supportive and facilitative attitude of the government staff (along with Teacher, Panchayat Secretary, Health Workers) influence the Panchayat functioning.
3. A strategic focus of sensitisation training of field-based staff at all levels will create more favorable conditions for Panchayats to perform more effectively.
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Monitoring Indicators of Gram Sabha functioning

1. Number of Gram Sabha meeting with full quorum.
2. Whether Gram Sabha is involved in planning process (Need/problem identification, analysis to solution)
3. Whether Gram Sabha Selecting beneficiary.
4. Whether Gram Sabha is selecting contractor/committee for implementation plan.
5. Proper utilisation of funds.
6. Accounts reporting by Gram Panchayat to Gram Sabha.
7. Meeting of ward member with members and community groups.

8. Percentage of women's participation in Gram Sabha.
9. Involvement of women Gram Sabha member in the planning process.
10. Functioning of peoples organisation. At the Gram Panchayat Level Panchayat Meeting:
 1. Number of Gram Panchayat Meeting with full quorum (and over 3/4 attendance) in the last one year.
 2. Attendance of PS and other staff in the Gram Panchayat meeting.
 3. Participation of women members in Panchayat meeting.

Functioning:

4. Preparation of plan at the Gram Panchayat meeting.
5. Whether Gram Sabha suggestions/ resolutions and priorities incorporated in the final plan.
6. Allocation according to plan.
7. How much of the Gram Panchayat
8. Functioning of committees.
9. Level of democratic processes of taking resolution.

Transparency:

10. Whether Gram Panchayats publishing Accounts report. Activity report
11. Use of Notice Board for important announcement and information sharing with people.
12. Accounts reporting in Gram Sabha.
13. Whether people are informed about the activities of Gram Panchayat.

Others:

14. Functioning of the school in the Gram Panchayat.
15. Condition of Road. Kharanja, Culvert etc.
16. Relationship with Patwari, Health Worker, Teachers, VLW's VAW's, PS etc.

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