

Quorum of Gram Sabha: A Case Study of Gram Panchayats of Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

73rd Amendment to the Constitution and subsequent development toward decentralisation has given certainty, continuity and strength to the Panchayati Raj System in India. The Gram Sabha has enabled people to participate in the development processes of village economy and society. Gram Panchayats are the statutory bodies in every village in our country India. Gram Panchayat is an instrument to bring people to grass-roots politics, but in reality, are people participating in politics or is there a real development of the village. Could we say that rural people are really taking decisions about their village problems? If not, is it lack of interest? The question is here, are the policies of the government sufficiently or accurate according to the need of the people, are the agendas of the government are beneficial or attractive, so that everyone from member of a Panchayat of village people can participate actively and enthusiastically. The fact is that the factors which are covered with the dust from the decades with old implementation should be renewed.

The present research paper deals with the processes, outcomes and perspective of the Gram Sabha meetings in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh, with main objectives of the quorum of Gram Sabha, involvement and participation of villagers in the process of their socio-economic development. The present research paper reveals that the area under study, predominately has the clear evidences of lack of interest of people in Gram Sabha meetings. It also shows that the concept of participatory development could be put into practice which provides awareness building regarding the role of the Gram Sabha. The civil society organizations have to be promoted by the district administration for awareness generation and building the capacities of the members of the Gram Sabha and Panchayats. It is also an opportunity for strengthening the Panchayati Raj, empowering the people and ensuring effective implementation of

rural development schemes. The study reflects that there is a need to introduce attractive agendas in the Gram Sabha and finance it well, so that people could participate in it with high zeal and this institution could meet the aspirations of our Constitution framers.

Introduction

The concept of Gram Sabha has been evolved through a historical process of people's struggle for their participation in developmental activities at different layers of governance including at the local level. The Gram Sabha consists of all the adults of a village and thus designated as a corporate body and the Gram Panchayat which is its Executive Committee. This concept has also received approval from several Indian political thinkers like Jai Prakash Narayan and Mahatma Gandhi. Jai Prakash Narayan, a Socialist thinker of India, advocated direct democracy at the village level in the form of the Gram Sabha. Gram Sabha has also been an integral part of the Gandhian concept of village Swaraj. In order to provide a key place for the Gram Sabha in the overall system of Panchayati Raj, a specific outline has been provided in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993 and subsequently Extension to Scheduled Area Act, 1996 by the Provisions of Panchayats.

Moreover, the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India not only gives a Constitutional mandate to the Panchayats, but it is based on the philosophy of decentralisation and power to the people. It provides the uniformity and formal structure of these traditional institutions of self-governance necessary for effective functioning. The earlier attempts at institutionalising the Panchayats were half-hearted and failed due to the absence of supportive Constitutional measures and lack of political will. The new Panchayati Raj institutions have the potential to lead in a new era of change and development in accordance with people's needs and priorities. Historically, the institution of Panchayat has been an integral part of the rural Indian polity and society. Since ancient times, the Panchayats have played a key role in organising and maintaining social order in Indian villages. These informal institutions were responsible for regulating and governing village society, according to the socio-political norms of the

times. Indian villages, remote and disconnected from the centres of State power, primarily decided their agenda of development and management of the society and its resources through the institution of Panchayats. 73rd Amendment of the Constitution visualised Panchayats as institutions providing social justice and economic development through self-governance. It focuses on the political processes initiated by Panchayats through Gram Sabhas by the lens of women, tribes and the village community. Through Panchayati Raj, an attempt is being made to initiate a new era of people's empowerment. The Amendment of the Panchayat Act to introduce the Gram Swaraj system clearly demonstrates this flexibility and commitment, but the study reflects it differently.

The study area lies in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh. The Panchayats lie 10 to 15 km. from Mandi town. Geographically the area lies in the outer Shivalik and near to river Beas. The data of the Gram Sabha Quorum of the year 2014-2015 is collected of different Panchayats of Mandi district. Mostly people of the study areas are well qualified, even women are aware about the surroundings. After these all facts, the Panchayats of these areas are not successful to meet the Quorum of Gram Sabha.

Methodology

The methodology involves primary data, secondary data, comprehensive studies using historical and socio- economic perspectives and application of a geographical framework for better representation and understanding both time and space. The primary data collected is supplemented by discussions with the officials concerned at Panchayat levels for gaining insights into the actual condition. The secondary data is collected from newspaper and generals. The personal observation and field survey have been conducted in the sampled Gram Sabha meeting of District Mandi in 2014-15 of Himachal Pradesh. The major focus of this study is on the quorum of the Gram Sabha.

Objectives

The study is devised to bring forth the strength of Gram Sabha, so that a vibrant institution could be flourished. Actually, the basic

ideas behind holding the meetings of Gram Sabha is the involvement of villagers in identification of their needs, problems faced by them in the implementation of various programmes at their level and solve them there and then only, if possible. It may be stated that this is an experiment to put the government at the door step of the villagers. To make it happen truly, all including government, officials and rural people have to work about it ardently.

Perspective

Giving constitutional status to the institution of Gram Sabha is a remarkable change in the rural institutional system of the country because this corporate body allows each and every voter to play a part in the processes of decentralised governance, planning and development. This institution could be responsive, accountable and efficient, if district and sub-district level cooperate it. Politicians and bureaucracy allow these institutions to function as feasible and energetic bodies because it has inherent potential to expose the politician misdeeds in the works related to rural development and poverty alleviation. Hence, the task ahead for the district administration is how to institutionalize the campaign so that meetings of the Gram Sabhas held regularly in a sustainable mode, whoever the officers are on the scene.

Analysis

The percentage of attendance in Gram Sabha meetings in the Panchayats of district Mandi suggests that it is difficult to be attained quorum of Gram Sabha successfully in the first attempt. Even after the practices of functioning in a coordinated way for a considerable period of time, the Panchayats has been working effectively and the meetings have either been irregular or marked with absence of the majority of people. In this respect the picture is disheartening about all India level.

In Himachal Pradesh every Gram Sabha shall hold four general meetings in each year and every meeting shall held on the first Sunday of January, April, July and on second October. For any general meeting of the Gram Sabha, representation of at least one-third of the total number of families represented by one or more

members of the Gram Sabha shall form a quorum and decision will be taken by a majority of members present and voting. The meeting postponed for want of quorum, representation of at least one-fifth of the total number of families represented by one or more members of the Gram Sabha shall be required for holding the adjourned meeting. In Himachal Pradesh the direction from the government followed by campaigning by high profiles, even failed to ensure people's participation in Gram Sabha meetings. The report of Gram Sabha meetings, 1 July, 2001 in Himachal Pradesh was frustrating as it could not be held in around 90% of the Panchayats in the Distt. Mandi for want of quorum. Out of the total 422 Gram Panchayats only in 45 Panchayats, Gram Sabha meeting held. The condition of a quorum of Gram Sabha is worst in Himachal Pradesh. After so many efforts and all arrangements, including an appeal from the secretary of Panchayat it couldn't be possible to meet the requirement of the quorum. A report on the situation in this regard brings out the point that the meetings of the Gram Sabha are not held regularly and even the statutory requirements of the State Panchayat Act are satisfied. Whatever may be reasons, it is ascertained from personal interactions with a cross-section of villagers that they do not find any interests in the Gram Sabha meetings. As long as there is no further scope for organized interactions as Gram Sabha meeting twice a year. For the success of the Panchayati Raj, the regular Gram Sabha meeting is one of the necessary conditions. Again for the success of Gram Sabha meeting attendance and active participation is essential.

The study shows that Gram Sabha meetings are adjourned due to lack of quorum despite government and social activists' efforts to boost attendance. It is desirable that all members of the Gram Sabha should have been present in the meetings. However, the presence of more than 50 percent of the members of in these meetings is a positive development in itself, in view of the fact that in Gram Sabha neither the members of the Gram Sabha are keen to attend these meetings nor is the Sarpanch interested in inviting. The programme for the conduct of meetings of Gram Sabha was chalked out systematically. In most Panchayats of Himachal Pradesh the Gram Sabha meetings adjourned for want of quorum. Table.1 is given

below on the Gram Sabha meetings of three different Panchayats of district Mandi of Himachal Pradesh.

Table 1: Meetings of Gram Sabha of Different Panchayats of District Mandi

Name of Panchayat	Session	No. of Household	Total Meetings	Successful	Unsuccessful	Adjourned
Sanyardh	April 2014 to Jan.2015	545	8	1	7	5
Padhiyun	April 2014 to Jan.2015	720	7	2	5	5
Tilli	April 2014 to Jan.2015	750	9	1	8	5

Source: Respective Gram Panchayat

Graph 1 : Meetings of Gram Sabha of Different Panchayats of District Mandi

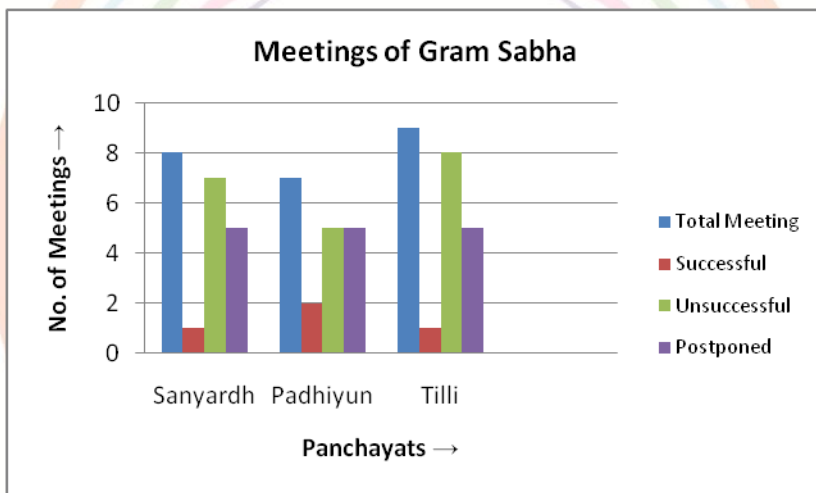


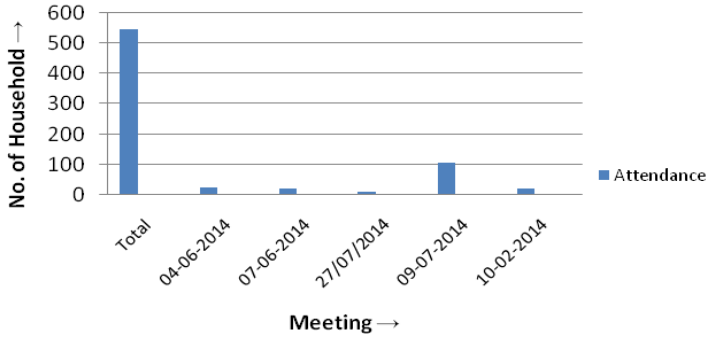
Table 2: Meetings of Gram Sabha of Panchayat Sanyardh

Date	06-04-2014	06-07-2014	27-07-2014	07-09-2014	02-10-2014
No.of Household	545	545	545	545	545
Attendance	23	21	09	106	22
% of Attendance	4.22	3.85	1.65	19.45	4.04
Result	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.

^oU.S. - Unsuccessful, ^sS. - Successful

Source: Respective Gram Panchayat

Panchayat - Sanyardh



Bar Graph-2 Meetings of Gram Sabha of Panchayat Sanyardh

Table - 3 Meetings of Gram Sabha of Panchayat Padhiyun:

Date	06-04-2014	21-04-2014	06-07-2014	15-08-2014	31-08-2014
No.of Household	720	720	720	720	720
Attendance	06	40	54	108	171
% of Attendance	0.83	5.56	7.50	15.00	23.75
Result	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	S.

°U.S. - Unsuccessful, °S. - Successful

Source: Respective Gram Panchayat

Bar Graph-3 Meetings of Gram Sabha of Panchayat Padhiyun

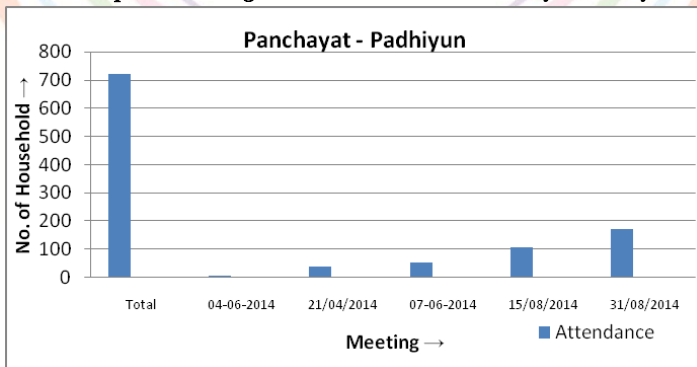


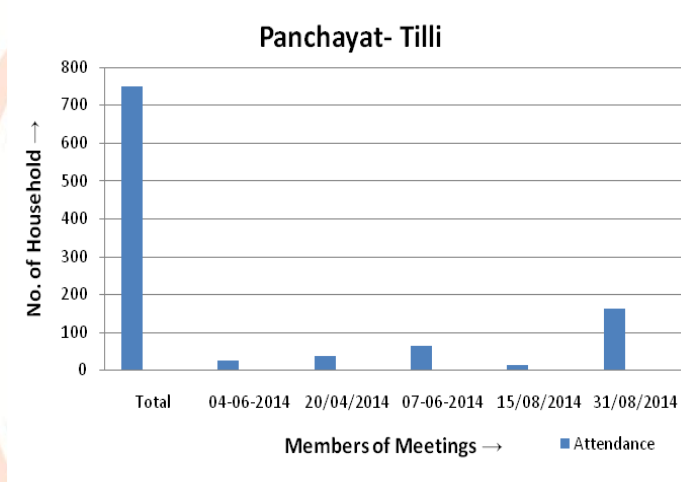
Table - 4 Meetings of Gram Sabha of Panchayat Tilli:

Date	06-04-2014	20-04-2014	06-07-2014	15-08-2014	31-08-2014
No.of Household	750	750	750	750	750
Attendance	27	40	65	16	165
% of Attendance	3.6	5.33	8.67	2.13	22
Result	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	S.

°U.S. - Unsuccessful, °S. - Successful

Source: Respective Gram Panchayat

Bar Graph-4 Meetings of Gram Sabha of Panchayat Tilli



The above given Table-1 shows that in three different Panchayats, 24 Gram Sabha meetings were scheduled and rescheduled in the period of 2014-2015. Out of total meetings 16.67% meetings were successful, whereas 83.33% were unsuccessful. It shows that the outcome of the Gram Sabha quorum is quite frustrated. The study area is 2-15 Km. from town Mandi, where people are well educated and advanced, but study shows that people are not concerned with the developmental plan of the Panchayat in their areas. Rare Gram Sabha meetings are successful throughout the year and reason behind successful meeting is that people want to enlist their names in the IRDP or etc. as discussed during field survey

with Mr. Khem Raj Thakur, one of the Panchayat Secretaries of the respective study area. The Tables 2-4 show that the percentage of attendance in the maximum meetings in all the surveyed Panchayats is very low as compared to the minimum required percentage. The bar graphs 2-4 show that the attendance of the members in first five successive meetings of year 2014 is very low to the total numbers of the household.

It has been also observed that some Gram Sabha meetings which were not succeeded were not rescheduled. In some Panchayats the success rate of the Gram Sabha meeting is the little better than another due to the awareness of people and the efforts of Pradhan and Panchayat Secretary, but the overall result is not satisfactory as our Constitution framers and Historical 73rd Amendment dreamed of. The Gram Sabha meeting is a kind of social renewal of commitment to the rural people and this renewable prescribes a new place for common people.

Gram Sabha is constituted as Parliament in which people of Panchayats participate and discuss the problems of the villages and find the way for the development of the villages. Gram Sabha is a good instrument in the hand of rural people for the development of the village as well as for their own progress, but more than two decades, the people of the mostly villages are not benefiting from this instrument - Gram Sabha. Why? This is a question of evaluation. Here are some facts that the member who are elected for Panchayat remain absent from Gram Sabha meeting for two years. How the real development of villages is possible in such lapses. In Himachal Pradesh minimum two Gram Sabhas are conditioned in the month of July and December, but in most Panchayats Gram Sabha meetings are adjourned and postponed due to want of quorum. Even in some Panchayats the post scheduled Gram Sabha is again postponed due to lack of the required quorum.

Some Ground Level Realities in the Institutions of Panchayati Raj in District Mandi of Himachal Pradesh in year 2014-2015

In Gram Panchayat Saraj (Development Block of District Mandi) Gram Sabha meeting was conducted successfully in 25 Panchayats

out of 45 Panchayats. In two Panchayats, Sayanj & Kiling people have shown their interest. This is also a question about the efforts of the representatives of the Panchayat, where as in Gohar Development Block just 2 Panchayats has met its Gram Sabha quorum out of 35 Panchayats. Here the efforts of Government didn't come into effect. There is more about some other Panchayats. In Panchayat Barot the Gram Sabha meetings were scheduled on 4-01-2015 (Tilak) postponed to 18-01-2015 due to want of quorum, same as in Panchayat Langna (Rajmal) the first meeting of the Gram Sabha was adjourned due to which no discussion took place and next meeting rescheduled on 18-03-15, but again People have shown no interest as 150 electorates given presence where as the requirement of the quorum was 320.

Along with the above said, there are many other disappointing factors, as a member of a Panchayat remain absent from Gram Sabha meetings for two years continuously and no action taken against the said member by the Block Development Office. The development work of the ward of this member closed from the same years. Even this issue is taken to Block Development Officer & Zila Parishad so many times, but no action has taken till Jan.2015. Could it be possible that this institution's progress in these situations as it require. There is a need of efforts of social activists and powerful leadership which could bring rural people to grassroots politics.

Suggestions:

The 73rd Amendment has given a good instrument in the hand of village people, but there is need of government to bring forth attractive agendas in the hand of village people. Pachayats should be well financed so that it could take its own initiative to start the work as required by the area of that Panchayat. There should also be a check on the utilization of the fund.

The work done under MANREGA which is of big level should be supervised by the higher authority to avoid the misuse of the money, as it is seen that after months of work done by MANREGA in the construction of roads is futile, even animals can't move on such road. Such wastage frustrates progressive people of the

respective area about the Panchayati Raj. The proper procedure should be followed in the discussion of the Gram Sabha as guided by the government. The discussed issue of the Gram Sabha meeting should be finalised if the majority of people are in favour of it, but it is seen that in some Panchayats the guidelines of the governments are ignored. After the assent of a majority the Pradhan of Gram Sabha does not give his or her decision due to objection of four or five people may be in fear, but the educated class sees it as wastage of time. In such circumstances, some hopeless or culprits succeed, but educated citizen become indifferent about this institution. There is need to overcome such shortfalls, so that the Gram Sabha meeting must be adjourned to next day or next month due to objection of just 5 or 6 persons. Otherwise in the next meeting, the same thing may happen because of some wicked people's objections, who are not concerned about any development. In this way Gram Sabha meeting is adjourned again and again and some cases it does not meet even throughout the year.

Conclusion

Certainty, continuity and strength have to be imparted to the institution of the Gram Sabha for making Panchayati Raj the people's raj in the real sense of the term. The process of Gram Sabha must be sustained by institutionalizing it in attitudes and the work - culture of the elected representatives, electorate and officials at the district and sub-district levels. This is the challenge before the concerned. It is also an opportunity with them to do their duties for strengthening the Panchayati Raj System, empowering the people and ensuring effective implementation of rural development schemes.

It is evident from the field survey that the quorum of Gram Sabha is not up to the mark as required. The success of Gram Sabha would be highly beneficial from the socio- economic and cultural point of view of rural areas. There is a dire need to study on the Quorum of Gram Sabha. Policy planning would be a great tool for enhancing the sustainable development in the rural area in real sense. In fact, Gram Sabha has always been a central issue in the discussion of the academic circle. Seeing the importance of this institution in

local governance, the Union Government had declared the 1999-2000 and 2009-10 as the Year of The Gram Sabha. However, there are quite a few oases of positive action and hope in the desert of inertia and despondency in the functioning of Gram Sabhas. The declaration confined to paper because in Himachal Pradesh, nothing worthwhile was happened in making as Gram Sabha vibrant institution at local level on account of the absence of power, lack of awareness and the apathy of the villagers and lack of enthusiasm on the part of this body. The caste and class difference have further reduced this body as a namesake institution for local governance in some Panchayats in Himachal Pradesh.

The study is carried with the broad objective to highlight and examine the quorum of the Gram Sabha. We expect that in a country like India, where more than 80% people live in the rural areas, would truly be benefited from grassroots politics viz. Panchayati Raj. Here it is believed that people took their own initiative for a developmental plan for their areas in Panchayati Raj, but the study shows that, in the realities they are not interested in it, then how the development of an area is possible. When people as well as elected representatives are not aware and interested about the policies and plan of the government, how the development of a ward as well as an area is possible. Along with this the concept of Good Governance has assumed greater significance in the recent times, it is necessary to examine that how the system is functioning in order to promote transparency and to establish accountability in these institutions. Moreover, Panchayats are expected to provide delivery of services and responsible for implementation of various poverty alleviation programmes and policies. Keeping this in view, the role of Gram Sabha is expected for promoting transparency and accountability in the programmes.

Expectations of the people would be arisen as Gram Sabha code the example as problem-solving institution. If the issues addressed in the meetings are not simultaneously attended by the bureaucracy, this might be a case of derailment, people might lose hope and faith in the Gram Sabha and may believe what they experienced was an

exception. Shortfalls and failures to keep the promises made at the last meeting of the Gram Sabha have to be noted. The people shall have to be given reasons for what could not be achieved. Only then we can say that people are now timely empowered in the decentralised governance mode and there is true power politics at the grassroots level and rural people are benefiting from developmental plan of their own area.

The question and the point of concern now is would any change be taken place in Gram Sabha, would the rural people be changed their mindset towards this institution, would the officially concerned be dedicated to such type of institutions, would the Central as well as State government be initiated about this institution.

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