

Gram Panchayat Initiatives For The Development Of Marginalized Sections In India: A Study From Selected States

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ABSTRACT

In the Indian context, the disadvantaged sections constitute SCs, STs OBCs, and minorities of Muslim and Christian religions. The recent planned development strategies have given special focus to involve the marginalised people in the mainstream of development through various initiatives by the central and state governments. The strategies are aiming to empower them by providing special provisions to participate in decision making process of local governance in planning and implementation of development schemes and to avail opportunities like wage employment, skill development for self-employment, access and use of basic amenities as well as individual needs, basic education and health care services to improve their socio and economic conditions. In order to involve the excluded sections, central government made many vital steps through constitutional provisions for strengthening the Gram Panchayats as bottom most planning and delivery mechanism by devolution of powers and functions. But, reality many cases, Gram Panchayats are deprived of resources due to incapable leadership or influence of the local power structure or political hindrances, on the other hand due to lack of good leadership, the panchayat system exclude some sections of people for many well known reasons. This study made an attempt to understand and identify the status of functioning of some of the better performing gram panchayats and their role in development of marginalized sections by various rural development initiatives. It also collected people's opinion about the type of development interventions of the government made positive impact on their life upliftment through Gram Panchayat.

Key Words : Disadvantaged section, Inclusive Approach, Discrimination and Exclusion

1. Background of the Study

The deprived and disadvantaged section of the society constitutes a group of people who were denied the opportunities to fully explore and utilize their abilities and thus having problems in their life. In the Indian context, the disadvantaged sections constitute SCs, STs OBCs, and minorities of Muslim and Christian religions. Further specifically to state that, the groups of people like destitute women, physically challenged, landless and poorest of the poor are facing worse social and economic problems in the society. The marginalized groups who occupy weak positions in social and economic hierarchy have also found themselves weak even within the local governments. While the representation of weaker sections is officially sought through affirmative action, in the actual practices that take place within the institutions, they are subjected to multiple types of discrimination and exclusion. The present study is being proposed to examine the development opportunities available for marginalised sections through GP and to verify the level of awareness among them on the schemes, and their rights. It also tries to study about the nature of participation of these groups in decision making process of local governance in planning and implementation towards strengthening the livelihoods of poorest of the poor and overall development of the panchayat.

2. Acknowledgement

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3. Statement of the Problem

The recent planned development strategies have given special focus to involve the marginalised people in the mainstream of development through various initiatives by the central and state governments. Those strategies are aiming to empower them by providing special provisions to participate in decision making process of local governance in planning and implementation of development schemes and to avail opportunities like wage employment, skill development for self-employment, access and use of basic amenities as well as individual needs, basic education and health care services to improve their socio and economic conditions. In order to involve the excluded sections, central government made many vital steps through constitutional provisions for strengthening the Gram Panchayats as bottom most planning and delivery mechanism by devolution of powers and functions. But, reality many cases, Gram Panchayats are deprived of resources due to incapable leadership or influence of the local power structure or political hindrances, on the other hand due to lack of good leadership, the panchayat system exclude some sections of people for many well known reasons. Therefore this study is aiming to understand and identify the status of functioning of some of the better performing gram panchayats and their role in development of marginalized sections by various rural development programmes.

4. Objectives of the study :

i.. To study the GP intervention on inclusive development. ii.To understand the process of planning and people participation. iii. Status of RD programmes on development of weaker sections.

5. Methodology of the study

This study was conducted in four states namely Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. These four states were selected based on the effectiveness of decentralized governance and devolution of powers and functions by the state governments. The study made analysis of efforts of better performing GPs on alleviation of poverty of marginalized sections of people living in the jurisdiction of the selected panchayats. For the purpose of comparison, in each state two better performing panchayats were selected having population of multi-communities. The name of the GPs selected for the study are Rampur (Sagar District) and Jamra (Guna District) GPs from Madhya Pradesh, Durgapur (Burdwan District), Jhamita (Howrah District) GPs from West Bengal, Nallur (Tirunelveli District) and Bearhatty (Nilgiris District) GPs from Tamil Nadu and Bevoor (Koppla District) and Bannur (Dakshina Kanada District) GPs from Karnataka.

6. Analysis of Field data

This section presents the field data collected from the respondents selected for the study, 10% samples were selected from each GP of sample states namely Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. The respondents were the members of gram panchayats exclusively covered the marginalised groups living in the panchayat. The major groups selected for the study were Scheduled Caste (SCs), Scheduled Tribe (STs), religious minority, Physically Challenged and women. In each group 10% sample were covered for detailed data collection. The following section deals with the analysis of field data and presents inferences based on the field observations and outcome of FDGs.

Table 1: Personal Particulars of the Sample population

Details	States				Total
	Tamil Nadu	West Bengal	Karnataka	Madhya Pradesh	
Sex particulars of Respondents					
Male	159 (64.4)	137 (56.4)	88 (40.4)	111 (46.4)	495 (52.3)
Female	88 (35.6)	106 (43.6)	130 (59.6)	128 (53.6)	452 (47.7)
Total	247 (100.0)	243 (100.0)	218 (100.0)	239 (100.0)	947 (100.0)
Age-wise Distribution of Respondents					
21-30	5 (2.0)	89 (36.6)	10 (4.6)	4 (1.6)	108 (11.4)

31-40	31 (12.6)	66 (27.2)	69 (31.7)	177 (74.1)	343 (36.2)
41-50	59 (23.9)	38 (15.6)	64 (29.4)	29 (12.1)	190 (20.1)
50-60	152 (61.5)	50 (20.6)	75 (34.4)	29 (12.1)	306 (32.3)
Total	247 (100.0)	243 (100.0)	218 (100.0)	239 (100.0)	947 (100.0)
Religious Status of the Sample Population					
Hindu	116 (47.0)	227 (93.4)	180 (82.6)	159 (66.6)	682 (72.0)
Muslim	2 (0.8)	15 (6.2)	16 (7.3)	79 (33.1)	112 (11.8)
Christian	128 (51.8)	0.0	20 (9.2)	0.0	148 (15.6)
Others	1 (0.4)	1 (0.4)	2 (0.9)	1 (0.4)	5 (0.5)
Total	247 (100.0)	243 (100.0)	218 (100.0)	239 (100.0)	947 (100.0)
Type of Marginalised Category					
SC/ST	16 (6.5)	161 (66.3)	50 (22.9)	43 (18.0)	270 (28.5)
Minority	93 (37.7)	68 (28.0)	35 (16.1)	64 (26.8)	260 (27.5)
Physically Challenged	4 (1.6)	0 (0.0)	24 (11.0)	11 (4.6)	39 (4.1)
Women	134 (54.3)	14 (5.8)	109 (50.0)	121 (50.6)	378 (39.9)
Total	247 (100.0)	243 (100.0)	218 (100.0)	239 (100.0)	947 (100.0)

Source : Data Collected from the Field.

Figures in the parenthesis in the States column represents percentages to the state total and end column represents percentages to total study population

The table 1 presents personal particulars of the sample respondents of the study. The study focused to cover marginalised sections benefitted under different rural development schemes of the study region. It includes women as one the category of study respondents; therefore the study represents almost equal percentage of men and women as respondents. Since the study selected 10% of the households of the selected study panchayats from each state, varied numbers of beneficiaries were interviewed for detailed data collection. Out of 947 respondents, 485 (52.3%) are males and remaining 452 (47.7%) are females. State wise data distribution shows, among four sample states, in Karnataka and MP females are outnumbered. It shows that, in majority cases more men are use to receive the benefits under government schemes but due to purposeful inclusion of women for the study, it reflects more women respondents.

Regarding age distribution, the study has respondents aged between 20 to 60 years. It is worthwhile to note that, the majority, i.e. 343 (36.2 per cent) respondents were in the age group of 31-40, followed by 306 (32.3 per cent) in the age group of 50-60 and 190 (20.1 per cent) were in the age group of 41-50. Larger majority respondents are in the age between 31-60 years. There were much dissimilarity among the sample states regarding age classification, viz. in Tami Nadu majority were above 50 years, but in the state of MP majority were in the age group of 31-40 years. In the case of West Bengal majority respondents are in the age group of 21-40. It reflects in West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh youngsters getting benefits compare to other states.

As proportionate to the national religious composition, this study also has majority of 682 (72.0 per cent) belonging to the Hindu religion, another 148 (11.8 per cent) respondents belong to Christianity and the remaining 112 (11.8 per cent) belong to the Islam religion. This study purposely selected 10% of different marginalised groups, hence it has good number of representation both minority groups of Muslim and Christianity.

On the basis of caste, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and the religious minorities, and also women are considered as marginal sections. People who are marginalized have relatively little control over their lives, and the resources available to them. The table reflects the number of respondents selected from each category of marginalised groups, i.e. out of total 947 respondents selected for the study, 378 (39.9%) are women belong to different social groups, 270 (28.5%) are SC&STs, 260 (27.5%) represents minority comprising both Christianity and Islam and the study also covered 39 (4.1%) physically challenged persons belonging to different community and religion.

7. People Participation in the GP Meetings

Table 2 : Gram Sabha Meetings and Views of Marginalised sections

Events	States								Total	
	Tamil Nadu		West Bengal		Karnataka		Madhya Pradesh			
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Quorum for meeting	247 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	243 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	200 (91.7)	18 (8.3)	230 (96.2)	9 (3.8)	920 (97.1)	27 (2.9)
Representation of different sections	246 (99.6)	1 (0.4)	243 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	218 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	239 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	946 (99.9)	1 (0.1)
Equal chance of voice raising	247 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	243 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	209 (95.9)	9 (4.1)	238 (99.6)	1 (0.4)	937 (98.9)	10 (1.1)
Voice of marginalised in decision making	243 (98.4)	4 (1.6)	227 (93.4)	16 (6.6)	125 (57.3)	93 (42.7)	207 (86.6)	32 (13.4)	802 (84.7)	145 (15.3)

Source : Data Collected from the Field.

Figures in the parenthesis in the States column represents percentages to the state total and end column represents percentages to total study population.

Gram Sabha is a constitutionally mandated mechanism through which grassroots' constituencies hold Panchayats accountable. Gram Sabha constitutes all the adult citizens of a village who have the right to vote. Accordingly, intensive Gram Sabha mobilization campaigns have to be conducted by the GPs with the help of the elected representatives, CBOs and partner organization. The factor determining rural people's participation is the level of awareness of different programs and their perceived benefits in their lives, which in turn is determined by the level of education especially functional education of the people. It is clear from data and analysis of the table 2, more than 90% households reported in all the study states, the Gramsabha meetings had quorum. The panchayats made adequate efforts to mobilise one third representation of women, and their mandatory quorum in Gram Sabha meetings. Not only women, other sections of social and low economic groups, minorities, physically challenged also encouraged to participate in Gram Sabha meetings. The panchayats were not put any hurdle for the participation and raising issues pertaining to the poorest of the poor and other marginalised groups. Higher participation of Scheduled Castes in the panchayat meeting is partly due to the fact that most of the rural development programs have special provisions for them. But mere physical participation is only ensured but they hesitate to actively participate in the discussion or in action. It was observed in most cases that the Mukhia (Village President) or a member of the dominant caste decides who will get what. No one pays attention to economically and socially marginalized members, and women. The dominant class and caste in the rural society controls the poor and deprived sections. Though the constitution attempted to change the situation, and minimize the political and social divide in the villages, there is no sign of change in the mindset of the dominant classes and castes in the rural society.

Table 3 : Views on Marginalised Section Participation in GS and Panchayat Activities

Activities	States								Total	
	Tamil Nadu		West Bengal		Karnataka		Madhya Pradesh			
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
GP Communication for GS meeting	21 (8.5)	226 (91.5)	39 (16.0)	204 (84.0)	38 (17.4)	180 (82.6)	48 (20.1)	191 (79.9)	146 (15.4)	801 (84.6)
Participation in GS meeting	66 (26.7)	181 (73.3)	42 (17.3)	201 (82.7)	36 (16.5)	182 (83.5)	59 (24.7)	180 (75.3)	203 (21.4)	744 (78.6)
Participation in Planning	39 (15.8)	208 (84.2)	37 (15.2)	206 (84.8)	65 (29.8)	153 (70.2)	68 (28.5)	171 (71.5)	209 (22.1)	738 (77.9)
Implementation of development strategies	57 (23.1)	190 (76.9)	38 (15.6)	205 (84.4)	22 (10.1)	196 (89.9)	35 (14.6)	204 (85.4)	152 (16.1)	795 (83.9)

Source : Data Collected from the Field.

Figures in the parenthesis in the States column represents percentages to the state total and end column represents percentages to total study population.

Only active involvement of people and community through participation can bring about a sustainable rural transformation. The socio-economic and political realities of Indian villages are not so conducive that just passing of legislation will bring desired changes. Even today almost two third of villagers are functionally illiterates. The rigid caste hierarchy has traditionally excluded SCs/STs and other backward castes from the realm of political decision-making. In the context of study region, the status of awareness on the conduct of Gram Sabha and effective methods of communication about the conduct of the meetings, out of 947

households interviewed from four states, only 146 (15.4%) have awareness about the communication of the GS meetings. Only around 20% people participate in the meetings and planning process of the panchayat. Further, 16% reported they participated in the implementation of the development schemes as beneficiaries. Majority villagers claim non-participation because their demands were not considered, and everything is decided by the Mukhia/Sarpunch, officials and dominant personality of major castes and communities.

Table 4 : Reasons for less people Participation in Gram Sabha

Reasons	States				Total
	Tamil Nadu	West Bengal	Karnataka	Madhya Pradesh	
Lack of awareness	226 (91.5)	204 (84.0)	180 (82.6)	191 (79.9)	801 (84.6)
Lack of personal interest	181 (73.3)	201 (82.7)	182 (83.5)	180 (75.3)	744 (78.6)
Negligence by the Panchayat	208 (84.2)	206 (84.8)	153 (70.2)	171 (71.5)	738 (77.9)
Lack of individual benefits	190 (76.9)	205 (84.4)	196 (89.9)	204 (85.4)	795 (83.9)

Source : Data Collected from the Field.

Figures in the parenthesis in the States column represents percentages to the state total and end column represents percentages to total study population.

In most of the states, size of the village panchayat is fairly large. It is difficult to mobilise and conduct a single Gram Sabha for many revenue villages. Even, big gatherings are mobilised with greater efforts will certainly affect the quality and levels of participation. Moreover, villages are highly politicized, divided on caste and class lines. Prevalence of patriarchal dominance of the decisions and women remain at the periphery. In reality in most of the villages, women and lower caste men would not come to this meeting unless they are prompted to come. Even if they come, they sit in one corner and would not raise their voice unless specifically encouraged. Dependence syndrome and ignorance about importance of participation in Gram Sabha meetings make citizens apathetic. The people feel, their presence or absents will not create any significant impact. It was found in almost all states that just after Panchayat elections when first Gram Sabha takes place, more people participate with new expectations. However, with the passage of time, when they realize that Gram Sabha is unable to deliver, the participation level dwindles down.

The reasons for less attendance in the gram sabha meetings of the selected study panchayats were analyzed and the data on the responses were presented in the table 4. The views of the sample respondents reports that, lack of personal interest for the people for participation in the meetings yields less attendance, it was reported by 78.6%. Similarly lack of awareness on the functioning of GP (84.6%) for the people hurdles the people's participation. In general, the GP has to make adequate efforts to propagate the date, timing, venue and agenda of the meetings well in advance through appropriate methods aiming to reach all the households of the GP. But in reality, negligence of GPs as reported by 77.9% respondents, the panchayats put less effort to communicate the purpose of the meetings. Therefore, people are not aware about the dates and purposes of the meetings which lead less percentage of attendance. In some circumstances illiterates and low caste people especially women are reluctant to participate in the meetings due to their innocence and suppression by the elite community or local powerful people. It is appreciable that, in the study area due to the interventions of NGOs and leadership of GP Surpanch played very important role in getting better attendance and mobilization of more participation in the meetings by the gram panchayats.

Table:5 Views of Respondents on the Development Initiatives taken by Gram Panchayats for Marginalized Section of People

Sectors	States								Total	
	Tamil Nadu		West Bengal		Karnataka		Madhya Pradesh			
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Economic Development	156 (63.2)	91 (36.8)	48 (19.8)	195 (80.2)	102 (46.8)	116 (53.2)	77 (32.2)	162 (67.8)	383 (40.4)	564 (59.6)
Social Development	162 (65.6)	85 (34.4)	52 (21.4)	191 (78.6)	102 (46.8)	116 (53.2)	76 (31.8)	163 (68.2)	392 (41.4)	555 (58.6)
Agriculture Development	172 (69.6)	75 (30.4)	68 (28.0)	175 (72.0)	159 (72.9)	59 (27.1)	133 (55.6)	106 (44.4)	532 (56.2)	415 (43.8)
Health Development	208 (84.2)	39 (15.8)	82 (33.7)	161 (66.3)	154 (70.6)	64 (29.4)	148 (61.9)	91 (38.1)	592 (62.5)	355 (37.5)
Education Development	183 (74.1)	64 (25.9)	71 (29.2)	172 (70.8)	143 (65.6)	75 (34.4)	122 (51.0)	117 (49.0)	519 (54.8)	428 (45.2)

Political	168 (68.0)	79 (32.0)	21 (8.6)	222 (91.4)	83 (38.1)	135 (61.9)	59 (24.7)	180 (75.3)	331 (35.0)	616 (65.0)
Employment	143 (57.9)	104 (42.1)	20 (8.2)	223 (91.8)	174 (79.8)	44 (20.2)	102 (42.7)	137 (57.3)	439 (46.4)	508 (53.6)
Skill Development	144 (58.3)	103 (41.7)	22 (9.1)	221 (90.9)	65 (29.8)	153 (70.2)	51 (21.3)	188 (78.7)	282 (29.8)	665 (70.2)
Entertainment	163 (66.0)	84 (34.0)	25 (10.3)	218 (89.7)	29 (13.3)	189 (86.7)	53 (22.2)	186 (77.8)	270 (28.5)	677 (71.5)
Other Activities	133 (53.8)	114 (46.2)	12 (4.9)	231 (95.1)	22 (10.1)	196 (89.9)	34 (14.2)	205 (85.8)	201 (21.2)	746 (78.8)

Source : Data Collected from the Field.

Figures in the parenthesis in the States column represents percentages to the state total and end column represents percentages to total study population.

The efficacy of a decentralised system in improving governance, achieving empowerment, enhancing efficiency in service delivery and impacting on growth and poverty depends on the nature of the institutions and more particularly the power structure in local areas. Although the general performance of panchayats in promoting inclusive development has not been impressive, there are some cases where they have taken initiatives to ensure better service delivery or promote development in a systematic manner. The experience of the people's plan and evidence of some other successful cases of panchayats are contributing to various aspects of development. The major objective of decentralised development is to promote local economic development by increasing production and productivity of agriculture and allied sectors, traditional professions, small scale industries with focus on employment. It attempts to upgrade the quality of basic services with special emphasis on health, education, water supply, sanitation including solid waste management and disabled care. These activities can better delivered through good governance with transparency, people participation.

Regarding the initiatives taken for socio-economic development and other aspects of the life of the poor by the panchayats selected for the study were discussed and views of the respondents were presented in the table 5, there were different types of responses reported for various parameters, i.e. majority people 65.2% benefitted under health programmes, 56.2% respondents were benefitted through the activities related to improvement of agriculture and supporting infrastructures, 54.8 were availing the educational initiatives undertaken by the panchayats. Similarly, 46.4 households among marginalised sections receive employment by the facilitation of the GPs, further around 40% respondents reported that, they have got benefits under socio-economic initiatives. Except few sectors mentioned here, panchayat has not taken any special initiatives for the livelihood development of the poorest of the poor in their region. The panchayats are busy with the routine schedule of delivery and maintenance of the basic services. They did not feel that, the responsibility of the panchayats also include all round development and ultimate empowerment of the community.

8. Rural Development programmes intervention

The major interventions in addition to the delivery and maintenance of the structures of the basic needs, the panchayats implement major employment scheme like MGNREGS, the contribution of this scheme has been made improvement in terms of increased income, women empowerment, mobility of women, holding bank accounts, credit worthiness, asset creation and ultimately improving the economic life of the marginalised sections in the study areas. Panchayats facilitation of another scheme called NRLM also equally contributed for social and economic life of the poor family through women self help adventures. The PMAY has created permanent housing to a number of families which created social recognition to these sections of people. PMGSY increased the connectivity and people have easy access to the market and other health facilities. Swach Bharath has brought appreciable changes on sanitation behaviour of the people. Other individual pension schemes provide life protection for the senior citizens. Maintaining rural infrastructures supports many dimensions of the life of poor people. Even then, careless exclusions of certain section of the people lead to problems in accessing the services, schemes and infrastructures created by the governing institutions. Ignorance and lack of awareness on the part of poor people also hinder the access of the services created for them.

9. Conclusion

This article reveals the status of functioning of Gram Panchayat, efforts for organising of Gram Sabha, people participation in gram sabha and the kind of initiatives taken for improvement of life of marginalised sections of the society and strategies towards achieving the goal of inclusive development. It also discusses on the status and nature of participation of underprivileged sections of people and their involvement in panchayat activities. It also brought reasons for less people participation in Gram Sabha meeting. It concludes with the

appreciation of making efforts for taking on-board of weaker section especially SCs/STs and women. Many development programmes implemented by the central and respective state governments made provisions for inclusion of marginalised sections either as prioritised beneficiaries or proportionate allocation or reservation of benefits to the eligible beneficiaries. But, even though initiatives made by the gram panchayats are having positive impact on the lives of weaker sections, still much needed to be done apart from the basic services delivery and inclusion as beneficiaries of various programmes. Involvement of people in planning for the development of livelihood of the poor especially attention to the excluded social section.