

Working of Gram Sabha in Punjab: Goals, Role and Challenges

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Abstract

Local self-government got a strong foundation after the 73rd and 74th amendments in the Constitution of India. The objectives of these amendments were to ensure the people's participation at the grassroots level and bring uniformity in local self-government institutions across the country. The 73rd amendment is about the rural local governments which are also known as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Apart from the three-tier structure of PRIs, this amendment also made the provision for the mandatory creation of the institution of Gram Sabha at the village level comprising all the adult members registered in the electoral roll as a voter in the Panchayat area. Therefore, the institution of Gram Sabha has become a significant platform for the people's participation in the deliberative bodies at the very grassroots level. Gram Sabha is the means of politicization of people which enhances their awareness towards state and national politics also. The objective of this research paper is to understand the role and functions of the Gram Sabha in a special context to Punjab Panchayati Raj Act 1994. It is also an attempt to analyze the role of Gram Sabha in strengthening and deepening democracy at the local level. In this study, the participation of the various sections of the society like women, scheduled castes and other backward strata in the functioning of Gram Sabha has also been analyzed. Many challenges and hurdles like the ignorance about and low participation of villagers in Gram Sabha have been recognized in this study which is responsible for the improper and weak working of Gram Sabha at the local level in Punjab and this body need to be strengthened more to ensure the participation of the people in this body of self-government. This study is specifically confined to the four villages of the Sangrur District of Punjab.

Keywords: Local Self-Government, Rural Punjab, Gram Sabha

Introduction

Democracy is about meaningful participation and accountability. To ensure this, it becomes necessary for any democratic government to decentralize power and give more and more power to the people. In a democratic country like India, it is not sufficient to have an elected, responsible and accountable government at the Centre and the State level but it is also necessary that there should be the same at the local level, an elected government to look after local affairs. The laws about local governments in India are an important step in the direction of 'government by the people'. Strong and vibrant local governments ensure both active participation and purposeful accountability. Local self-government refers to the system of governance in which local authorities have the power to make a decision and manage their affairs in their respective areas. Local self-government plays an important role in ensuring democracy, accountability, and effective governance at the grass-roots level. It enables citizens to participate in the decision-making process and to hold their elected representatives accountable for their actions. It also

helps to promote economic development and social welfare by providing services such as health, education, sanitation and infrastructure development at the local level.

However, the trend regarding decentralization and local self-government has been growing in many parts of the world in recent years. The basic idea of democratic decentralization is sharing the decision-making authority with lower levels. It entails a system of governance in which citizens possess the right to hold local public officials accountable through the use of elections, grievance meetings in Gram Sabha and other democratic means. On these lines, democratic decentralization can be defined as a meaningful authority devolved to local units of governance that are accessible and accountable to the local citizenry, who enjoy full political rights and liberty.ⁱ

Local self-government in India

It is considered that self-governing village communities existed in India from ancient times in the form of *sabha* (village assemblies) and *samiti* (village panchayat). ‘The king’s authority was substantially limited by tribal assemblies like the Sabha and Samiti which discharged judicial and political functions. The Sabha comprised a council of an elder member from the tribe, perhaps women also attended it.ⁱⁱ The role and functions of these institutions kept on changing at different points in time. In modern India, elected local government bodies were created after 1882. Lord Rippon, regarded as the father of local self-governance in India, took the initiative in creating these bodies. However, the Indian National Congress also started taking necessary steps to make all local bodies more effective. Accordingly, under the Government of India Act 1919, village panchayats were established in several provinces. During India’s freedom movement, Mahatma Gandhi strongly pleaded for the decentralization of political as well as economic power at the local level.

“Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic. It follows therefore that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs” - Mahatma Gandhi.ⁱⁱⁱ

After independence, the subject of local government was assigned to the States. It was also mentioned in the Directive Principles as one of the policy directives to all state governments in the country. Therefore, some efforts in this direction of developing local government bodies had already taken place such as the Community Development Programme in 1952, which sought to promote people’s participation in local development in a wide range of activities. At the end of the decade of 1960’s some states like Gujarat, and Maharashtra adopted the system of elected local bodies. But in many States, those local bodies did not have enough powers and functions to look after the local development. In 1989 the P.K.Thungon Committee recommended constitutional recognition for the local government bodies. Subsequently, the central government introduced two constitutional amendments in the Parliament in 1989. These amendments aimed at strengthening local governments and ensuring an element of uniformity in their structure and functioning across the country. Later in 1992, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments were passed by the Parliament. The 73rd Amendment is about rural local governments (which are also known as Panchayati Raj Institutions or PRIs) and the 74th amendment made the provisions relating to urban local government (Nagarpalikas). The 73rd and 74th Amendments came into force in 1993.

73rd Amendment provides a uniform three-tier structure at the rural level that is Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the intermediate level and Zila Parishad at the District level. Along with the other compulsory provisions, this amendment also made the provision for the mandatory creation of the institution of Gram Sabha at the village level comprising all the adult members registered in the electoral roll as a voter in the Panchayat area. Therefore, the institution of Gram Sabha has become a

significant platform for direct people's participation in the decision-making process at the very grassroots level. Gram Sabha is the means of politicization of people which enhances their awareness towards state and national politics also. Gram Sabha is described as 'watchdog Gram Sabha' and a force to reckon with. They are also referred to as the soul of Panchayat.^{iv} Jayaprakash Narayan, a staunch advocate of 'Direct Democracy' at the village level, states, "To me, Gram Sabha signified village democracy. Let us not have only representative government from the village up to Delhi. In one place, at least there should be direct government- direct democracy. The relationship between Panchayat and Gram Sabha should be that of Cabinet and Assembly". Panchayats must be looked upon as the nucleus of all development work and Democratic experimentation at the village level.^v

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the position, structure and functioning of Gram Sabha under the Punjab Panchayati Raj Act 1992.
- To examine the level of awareness among villagers about Gram Sabha and patterns of people's participation in the meetings of Gram Sabha and also the factors contributing to greater and lesser participation, as the case may be.
- To understand the communication between Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha.

Scope and Methodology of Study

To meet the above-mentioned objectives, the study focused on four Gram Panchayats in the Sangrur district of Punjab. Respondents were selected using a random sampling method, with members of the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat from each village included. A purposive sampling method was used to select 22 elected representatives and 78 members of Gram Sabha for the study. The research design was both descriptive and analytical in nature, and data was collected through primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained through interviews with elected members and members of the Gram Sabha, while secondary data was collected through the review of various documents such as the Gram Sabha attendance register, minute book, and proposals by the Panchayats. The reports of various government commissions, committees, and study teams were also reviewed to gather information on the structural and functional aspects of the Gram Sabha. Therefore, the study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the functioning of Gram Panchayats in the selected villages, by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Punjab Panchayati Raj Act 1994 and Gram Sabha

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, passed by the Narasimha Rao government, is undoubtedly a landmark in the history of PRIs. It provides constitutional status to Panchayati Raj and assigns a mixed role to the panchayats at various levels. The amendment sought to provide a uniform basis for PRIs across states while also allowing for state-level variations, as it contained both binding and discretionary features. The main binding features are as follows:

1. Constitutional status for PRIs, including the Gram Sabha.
2. Mandatory reservation of seats for SCs/STs (proportional to their population) and women (one-third) at all levels, including the chairperson position.
3. Direct election (with two exceptions) every five years of member at all three levels (village, intermediate and district) with fresh elections becoming mandatory before the ending of the term or

within six months in case of dismissal. The indirect election for Chairman at intermediate and apex (or district) levels.

4. State finance commission to be set up by each State Government to suggest ways of devolution of funds and financing PRIs.
5. Election Commission at the state level in each state to conduct PRI elections.

Before this amendment, local government was a state subject, and states were free to make laws in this regard. However, after the amendment, all states were given one year to amend and make changes to local bodies to conform to the amended Constitution. Therefore, the Punjab government passed the Punjab Panchayati Raj Act of 1994 in light of these amendments.

In Punjab, the Gram Sabha is an important institution of local self-government under the Panchayati Raj system. It is the primary unit of democratic governance at the village level and consists of all the adult members of a village who have their names in the electoral rolls. The composition, style of working and functions of Gram Sabha is very state-to-state. As the Punjab Panchayati Raj Act 1994 prescribes Gram Sabha comprised of any village or group of contiguous villages having a population not less than two hundred, at least two general meetings of Gram Sabha should be held in a year, one in the month of December after the harvesting of the Sawani Crop (hereinafter called the Sawani meeting) and the other in the month of June after the harvesting of the Hari crop (hereinafter called the Hari meeting) on such date as may be fixed by the Sarpanch. The quorum required for any meeting of the Gram Sabha is the fifth of the total number of its members. Gram Sabha a basic unit of people's participation and decision-making body, has some important functions to perform such as: -

- Examine the annual statements of accounts/audit report, audit reports note and replies to them.
- Consider proposals for fresh taxation or enhancement of existing taxes.
- Mobilize voluntary labour and contribution of kind and cash.
- Undertake a program for adult education and family welfare within the village.
- Promote unity and harmony among all sections of the community.
- Seek clarification from the Sarpanch and members of Gram Panchayat about any scheme, expenditure and income.

The Gram Sabha serves as a watchdog for the benefit of village communities by overseeing the operations of the Gram Panchayat. It offers a political platform for villagers to meet and discuss common issues, thereby gaining insight into the needs and aspirations of the community. Simultaneously, the Gram Sabha serves as a venue for people to gather, discuss, deliberate, and assess the actions of elected representatives, promoting transparency and accountability in the administration of village Panchayats. In this way, the Gram Sabha is a tool for direct and participatory democracy, providing crucial input to Gram Panchayats to help them govern local affairs effectively. The Gram Sabha has the potential to challenge conventional power structures through its dynamic operation, and educating people about its importance and operation will encourage their participation in their own Gram Sabha meetings.

To examine the level of awareness among villagers about Gram Sabha and patterns of people's participation in the meetings of Gram Sabha in Punjab four villages namely Balad Khurd, Sangheri, Benra and Bhutal Kalan in Sangrur District of Punjab have been studied.

Findings of the Study

The research analyses the knowledge and importance of Gram Sabha in panchayat members and Gram Sabha members. But it is a very interesting fact that even, some of the panchayat members do not know

the real meaning and functions of the Gram Sabha, they confuse it with gram panchayat. In the answer to the question that how many meetings have been held in last year out of 22 panchayat members 09 members said there were 2 meetings but the rest were confuse the meetings of Gram Sabha with the meetings of gram panchayat. Out of 22 respondents 12 said that all Gram Sabha members attend the meeting but when we asked the next question that how the decisions are passed in Gram Sabha meeting whether through Voice Voting, Show of hands or Secret ballot then, they remained silent. When we asked them about the resolutions passed in last Gram Sabha meeting, they gave the answers like, they have distributed the sewing machines to the girls, pension distribution and road making. It indicates that there was no Gram Sabha meeting held properly.

The research conducted an analysis on the knowledge and significance of Gram Sabha among both the panchayat members and Gram Sabha members. However, it was alarming to note that a few panchayat members lacked knowledge regarding the true meaning and functions of Gram Sabha and were confusing it with the gram panchayat.

Furthermore, when asked about the number of meetings held in the last year, only 9 out of the 22 panchayat members were able to correctly state that there were two meetings. The other members were confused and conflated the meetings of the Gram Sabha with those of the gram panchayat. Additionally, out of the 22 respondents, only 12 claimed that all Gram Sabha members attended the meetings. When queried on how decisions were passed during the Gram Sabha meetings, such as through voice voting, show of hands, or secret ballot, they were unable to provide a clear answer.

Moreover, when asked about the resolutions passed during the last Gram Sabha meeting, the answers provided by the panchayat members were rather vague, such as the distribution of sewing machines to girls, pension distribution, and road-making. This indicated that no proper Gram Sabha meeting was held, and there was a lack of knowledge and understanding of the Gram Sabha's true functions and procedures. It was also observed that there was no specific agenda set for each Gram Sabha meeting. The panchayat members were unable to discuss the minutes available for the Gram Sabha meetings and lacked clarity regarding postponing the Gram Sabha in the absence of a "quorum" due to their lack of knowledge about the quorum.

Out of the 22 respondents, only 12 panchayat members attended training programs related to Panchayati Raj, indicating a significant need for more education and training on the subject.

According to the responses of 22 panchayat members, 14 of them reported that the annual plan was discussed in Gram Sabha meetings, and the administration's report of Panchayat for the last six months was also presented in the meeting. However, they revealed that there is no specific agenda for each Gram Sabha meeting, and they lacked clarity about the concept of "quorum" and its importance in conducting a meeting. Moreover, they were not able to provide any details about the minutes of the previous Gram Sabha meetings. Regarding their training in Panchayati Raj, 12 out of the 22 respondents reported attending training programs related to it.

Table no. 1 Responses of Gram panchayat members

Sr.no	Questions	Options	No. of respondents	Total
1	Did the meetings of Gram Sabha hold in the previous year?	Yes	9	40%
		No	13	60%

		Total	22	100%
2	Did any resolution pass in the presence of gram Sabha?	Yes	9	40%
		No	13	60%
		Total	22	100%
3	Awareness about the quorum of the Gram Sabha meetings.	Yes	-	-
		Unable to say	22	100%
		Total	22	100%
4	Availability of minute book and attendance register of gram Sabha meetings	Yes	-	-
		No	22	100%
5	Who decides the date and time of the meeting of Gram Sabha	Panchayat secretary	4	18%
		Sarpanch	13	59%
		Do not know	5	23%
		Total	22	100%
6	Do the members of gram Sabha participate in the meetings?	Yes	12	55%
		No	10	45%
		Total	22	100%
7	Respondents on the Special efforts made to increase the women's participation in Gram Sabha	Yes	-	-
		No	22	100%
8	Respondents on the Special efforts made to increase the participation of Schedule caste and other backward classes in the Gram Sabha	Yes	-	-
		No	22	100%

Source: - Personal Interview

The answers of the Gram Sabha members regarding the knowledge of Gram Sabha. Only 12 respondents out of 78 have knowledge about Gram Sabha and it is interesting that even the Panchayat members do not have knowledge about the Gram Sabha. One of the respondents, who were the member of GPs said that the place of Gram Sabha is acquired by the Gram Panchayat. Clearly the people are aware about the Gram Panchayat rather than Gram Sabha.

The Gram Sabha members don't have knowledge about the meeting of Gram Sabha held after every six months. Along with the 14 Panchayat members, only four villagers answered that the meeting of Gram Sabha takes place after every six months. These four persons are in very dominating position in the village being related to the Sarpanch or Panches. But the common people of these four villages are unaware about

the meetings of the Gram Sabha. The main reason of their unawareness is that the meetings of the Gram Sabha are not held properly in these villages.

The participation in the Gram Sabha meetings is absolutely nil. Only some Panchayat members said that Gram Sabha meetings were held properly in the village but the respondents of the Gram Sabha members said that no meeting is held in the village on any issue. One of them said that Sarpanches and the dominated members of Panchayat are not interested in calling the meetings of Gram Sabha. They want to concentrate the village politics in their own interest.

The village adult members do not participate in the meetings of the Gram Sabha. Not even a single respondent gave positive response regarding the meetings. Out of 22 Panchayat members of all the four villages only the 09 respondents said that the meetings were held but all 78 members of Gram Sabha negated the existence of Gram Sabha meetings. Interestingly, not even a single common villager knew about the number of meetings held in the previous year. Even most of the village members did not know about the existence of Gram Sabha in the village administration.

4 Respondents of panchayat answered that it is Panchayat Secretary who decides the time and place of Gram Sabha. 13 people told that Sarpanch decides it but 5 respondents unable to say about this. But 78 Gram Sabha members did not know that who decides the time and place of the meetings.

Out of the 78 Gram Sabha respondents 68 had a view that the Gram Sabha should be strong than Gram Panchayat. Because the Gram Sabha has a vast representation of the adult members of the village. If the Gram Sabha is stronger, then people have the opportunity to participate actively in its decision-making process. One of the respondents made a suggestion that people must vote only those people who can ensure their participation in the decision making at the village level. By participating in Gram Sabha, we can educate our children about the structure and functions of Gram Sabha. On the other hand, most of the Panchayat members had a view that Gram Panchayat should be more powerful than the Gram Sabha. Because of all the people do not have the proper knowledge about the functioning of the Gram Sabha, one respondent said that if we strengthen the Gram Sabha then the class and caste conflict in the village will also be demolished. The government must take the necessary steps to strengthen the grassroots democracy at the village level.

All the members of Gram Sabha respondents said that they do not receive the message about the gathering of Gram Sabha, because the meetings of the Gram Sabha are not held in actual. The place of meeting should also be in the middle of the village, which is suitable for all. The study shows that out of 78 Gram Sabha respondents, majority of the respondents (83%) had a view that proper functioning can be the best tool to strengthen the democracy because of the people’s participation in decision making and self-governance. 17% respondents did not agree to it. Many respondents said that the people have no knowledge about the existence of this democratic institution.

Table No. 2 Responses of Gram Sabha Members

Sr.no	Questions	Options	No. of respondents	Total
1	Knowledge about the institution of Gram Sabha.	Yes	12	15%
		No	66	85%
		Total	78	100%
2	Did the meetings of Gram Sabha held in the previous year?	Yes	04	5%
		No	74	95%

		Total	78	100%
3	Do you participate in the meetings of Gram Sabha?	Yes	-	-
		No	78	100%
5	Who decides the date and time of the meeting of Gram Sabha	Panchayat secretary	-	-
		Sarpanch	-	-
		Do not know	78	100%
6	Reasons for not participating in the meetings of Gram Sabha	Due to party contradiction	-	-
		Busy schedule	-	-
		Unawareness	78	100%
		Domination of Sarpanch or gram Panchayat	-	-
7.	How does the Gram Sabha announce in your village?	Village notice board	-	-
			-	-
		Public announcement in Gurdwara/ Mandir etc.	-	-
		Via Chowkidar	-	-
		Do not announce	68	87%
		Unable to say	10	13%
8	Did any Special efforts made by Panchayat or other social organization to increase the participation in Gram Sabha	Yes	-	-
		No	65	83%
		Unable to say	13	17%
		Total	78	100%
9	Which local body should be strong Gram Sabha or gram Panchayat?	Gram Sabha	68	87%
		Gram panchayat	10	13%

Source: Through Personal Interview

Political participation of women shows their interest and political awareness or consciousness towards village politics. Gram Sabha is a very good platform to increase the women's participation in the politics, but in the Gram Panchayats their participation is also very low. All respondents said that there are no any special steps taken by the Panchayat to ensure the participation of women in the political activities at the village level. Women enter only through the 33% reservation in the Panchayats but even they do not participate in actual and their son, husband or father-in-law perform the functions. One Sarpanch claimed to work for increasing female participation and in further enquiry about "the work" he answered "like stitching". When there is a debate of equal participation of women in the legislative body, at the same time we have failed to ensure the participation of women at village level in the Gram Sabha. All the patriarchal trends of Indian society influence the women's awareness and participation in the Gram Sabha. From the centuries women should be confined to the household and but if they can handle the household very well then how would they are incapable in managing political affairs. In a nutshell, the patriarchal mind-set of the society has become the hurdle in the proper awareness and participation of women in Gram Sabha. The study reveals that despite the Gram Sabha being a crucial platform for grassroots democracy and local self-governance, its effectiveness is hindered by several reasons.

- Firstly, there is widespread ignorance among the masses about the existence and purpose of Gram Sabha.
- The meetings of the Gram Sabha are not conducted efficiently or with regularity.
- The tasks assigned to the body are often ad-hoc in nature, and lacking in consistency.
- The political education of the masses is at a low level.
- Furthermore, political contradictions at the village level, such as domination by traditional leaders, influential personalities, and upper caste and class members, impede the democratization of the Gram Sabha structure.
- The majority of the village population, such as women, SC, and OBC, often do not have a voice in village affairs.
- The study also notes that citizens' apathy and indifference towards public services, coupled with a lack of interest in the affairs of the village, further contributes to the ineffectiveness of the Gram Sabha.
- Additionally, some Sarpanchs may be hesitant to face the general assembly of people for fear of criticism.

Taken together, these factors have hindered the Gram Sabha's ability to provide a voice to the voiceless, and to offer a platform for grassroots democracy in the villages. Despite its potential to strengthen grassroots democracy, the Gram Sabha has thus far failed to achieve its intended goals especially in the Punjab state of India.

Conclusion

In order for the Gram Sabha to truly become the backbone of local self-government as envisioned by the Panchayati Raj Act, its provisions must be implemented in a proper manner. Currently, the structure and functions of the Gram Sabha are largely unknown to the populace, resulting in a lack of participation in context of Punjab. To rectify this, the government and social organizations must take measures to raise awareness and educate the public on the powers and structure of the Gram Sabha. Non-governmental and people organizations can play a crucial role in this regard by actively engaging with and providing education to the populace. The active participation of the Gram Sabha is essential in order to strengthen grassroots democracy in India. The Gram Sabha is a constitutional body meant to enable community

participation in self-governance and promote accountability within the system. However, the current lack of awareness and active participation has rendered it an inactive body. The response of the villagers to the meetings of the Gram Sabha is poor, and the meetings are often conducted informally without adhering to proper formalities. In a democracy, local tasks should be delegated to the village people and their representatives, as they have a better understanding of the local situation and concerns. By strengthening local government, the democratic process is also strengthened. Therefore, it is crucial to raise awareness and educate the populace on the importance and functions of the Gram Sabha, and to encourage their active participation in its meetings. This will promote transparency and accountability in local governance and empower the people to have a say in the decision-making process. Ultimately, the success of the Gram Sabha lies in its ability to effectively represent the needs and concerns of the local populace, and to facilitate their participation in the democratic process.

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