

Increasing Participation and Changing Paradigm of Democracy at Grassroots: A Study of Gram Sabha in Goa

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Abstract:

Democracy is considered the most desirable form of government in modern times. Moreover, there is a growing emphasis on grassroots democracy. Participation at grassroots is very significant as people can discuss, debate and solve issues affecting their village. Gram Sabha, a grassroots unit in India, appeals to the general mass, regardless of class/caste/gender and political partisanship. This research, based on a case study in Goa, observes that in general circumstances, people lie low as far as political participation is concerned for varied reasons. However when their living, subsistence or identity is at stake, people come out in large numbers to participate in Gram Sabha. This assertion has led to an impetus to overall change at the grassroots and has thus contributed towards greater grassroots democracy.

Introducing Gram Sabha:

The Gram Sabha (GS) in India has the potential to bring people structurally close to democratic institutions. It has been described as 'an epitome of participatory and direct democracy.' Gram Sabha is a constitutional body consisting of all persons registered in the electoral rolls of a village Panchayat. Article 243-B of the Indian Constitution defines it as "a body consisting of persons registered in electoral rolls relating to a village", which forms the territorial area of a Panchayat, an institution of local self-government. GS provides a platform for people to meet at a common venue, discuss and solve developmental issues of their village and get their elected representatives to be answerable. It's a populist concept intending to represent ordinary people's needs and wishes. GS appeals to the general masses, regardless of class/caste/gender distinction and political partisanship and reaffirms a greater role for people in governing their village. It facilitates consensus democracy where consensus decision-making can be applied and provides a platform where even minority opinions can be taken care of. It functions on the principle that democratic power can be best exercised if it is vested in a local community instead

of isolated, atomized individuals. GS promotes grassroots democracy which allows individuals equal access to decision-making irrespective of their standing in a local community. Gram Sabha widens the opportunity for people to make their contribution to important decision-making. It encompasses all the five criteria of democratic progress, as specified by Robert Dahl.¹

- Equal votes as the means of expressing preferences in final decision making.
- Equal chances to express preferences.
- Equal opportunities to be informed and arrived at preferences.
- Citizens decide what matters are or are not to be decided.
- All adult members to be included.

Gram Sabha asserting a significant role in Goa:

Goa, a geographically small but fast developing state in India, has been witnessing a spurt of activities at the Gram Sabha level in the last few years. Goa was liberated from Portuguese rule in 1961, and elections to Panchayat bodies were held even before the state could go for assembly elections. Goa has two districts viz. North Goa and South Goa and twelve Talukas (blocks within the districts) with altogether 189 village Panchayats. The average size of Gram Sabha in Goa is not more than 1000 people. There are officially spelt out powers of Gram Sabha. The law prescribes at least four meetings in a year and four special Gram Sabhas. The quorum is one tenth of the voters of the village. The territorial jurisdiction is comparatively small and it is possible to convene a single Gram Sabha for the whole village. The Goa State Panchayat Raj Act of 1994 has devolved important powers to Gram Sabha.

Until recently, Gram Sabhas were poorly attended and were merely an administrative body carrying out auditing accounts and identifying beneficiaries for welfare schemes. Gram Sabhas saw little participation, with negligible or almost nil women participants. However Gram Sabhas today are turning out to be a much awaited event in Goa's

villages. They seem to be creating a sense of belonging. People, including women, are attending in large numbers all over Goa and are enthusiastically participating; there are heated discussions on various issues and verbal clashes and charges made against elected functionaries.

Villages in Goa are facing numerous problems such as incessant mining, garbage, uncontrolled growth of concrete jungles and megaprojects, strain on infrastructures, exodus of migrants etc which are adversely affecting people in the villages. The demography of the villages is undergoing a drastic change and even the survival of traditional drainages, culverts, ponds, fish life, beaches and sand dunes is at stake. One of the ways to stop this is by strengthening the grassroots institution, Gram Sabha. This paper attempts to identify the reasons for increased participation at the gram level in Goa.

Research method:

The research was exploratory in nature and emphasis was laid on qualitative data. The primary data was collected by interviewing people whose names were registered as voters of a Panchayat (Gram Sabha Members). The total number of respondents was 355 from across all 12 Talukas. A structured questionnaire was administered which included both close-ended and open-ended questions. Respondents were met at their residences as per their convenience. Qualitative data was also collected by personally attending various Gram Sabhas in different villages and observing the proceedings and happenings during the meetings. This data has contributed substantially to this research work.

Reasons for low participation:

There are various reasons why the participation at Gram Sabhas before 2008 was low. People were simply not interested in grassroots politics. 'susegad' (happy and tension-free natured people) is often associated with Goans. People were more preoccupied with their jobs, field work etc. Women were occupied with their household chores while people in the age group 18-24 were more interested in studying and making their careers. Gram Sabhas were considered only as an agency to perform the superimposed agenda of the government. Critical issues affecting the village were hardly discussed at the meetings. This did not motivate people to attend Gram Sabhas. They showed little interest because they were less informed about the significance of Panchayat

functioning and importance of Gram Sabha. There was hardly any communication from the Panchayat functionaries with regard to date, time and venue of the Gram Sabha. Sometimes the venue was changed at the last minute or the Gram Sabha was called off without prior notice. Increasing corruption, red tape and lack of concern on the part of elected representatives created a feeling of helplessness in people, and therefore they felt it was a waste of time to attend meetings.

Reasons for paradigm shift in participation at Gram Sabhas:

There has been a phenomenal increase in the number of people participating in Gram Sabhas in recent years. (2008 can be considered the differentiating line as the proposal of New Regional Plan for Goa was hyped in this year which led to a lot of awareness among people in Goan villages.) Greater participation indicates growing concerns which motivated people to attend in large numbers. People are now interested to be a part in the governance matters pertaining to their village. There are certain specific issues which have begun to affect the interests of the people and their village in a major manner. People have started attending Gram Sabhas for the following reasons:

- **Short term benefits:** Some people participate for the short term benefit they will get (or have already got) from the Panchayat for the issue of licenses, employment under 100 days employment scheme, to be registered as BPL (below poverty line), to get benefit from some schemes etc.
- **Integral part of the political system:** People have begun to feel that they are a part of the Panchayati Raj System and it is their responsibility to participate in Gram Sabhas. They are now interested in village politics. They believe that their presence makes a difference and that they need to give their opinions and suggestions for the development of their village. They think that their contribution is of vital significance. They feel even minute things like keeping vigilance on the BPL list framed by the Panchayat is necessary.
- **Check on the elected representatives:** People feel that Gram Sabhas are the best instruments to check corrupt tendencies of

their rulers at grassroots. They attend Gram Sabhas to question, counter question and seek answers for various deeds of their elected representatives. Quite a few participated to show their distrust against the existing representative/s out of a sense of being betrayed by him/them.

- **Demonstration effect:** For some people, participation is merely an act of imitation of friends, neighbours, and relatives. Some participate as it has social acceptance, others because it is embarrassing to look stupid by not participating when the issues affect everybody's life and the future of the village is at stake.
- **Volatile Atmosphere:** A highly politicized atmosphere at grassroots level has also increased participation. An overemphasis on its own role by the Panchayat and by the Gram Sabha has proved counter-productive, resulting in people losing faith in their elected representatives and vice versa. They see each other as rivals. While people look at the Gram Sabha as a forum to harass the Panchayat chief, the latter treats it as a hostile gathering. The war of words, bad mouthing, use of vulgar language, accusations, etc is at times a regular feature. People are now involved in Gram Sabha functioning and realize that Gram Sabha is the best platform to express their opinions, voice their dissent and get things done for themselves and for the village even if it involves resorting to abuse and accusations.
- **Issues affecting the villages:** The various issues affecting the villages in Goa have definitely led to an increase in participation at grassroots. Some of these are discussed below:

a) Regional Plan 2011

Goa Government's decision to implement the Regional Plan 2011 saw havoc in different parts of Goa. It was strongly felt that Goan people had not been consulted. The pressures from different corners of society made the Government re-think its implementation process and propose Regional Plan 2021 which would be formulated with the consultation, discussions and opinions of different

Gram Sabhas. This led to calling large numbers of Gram Sabhas. Different villages had varied protests, opinions and suggestions for Regional Plan 2021. GS members opposed any move to convert water bodies and asked the authorities to retain ecologically sensitive zones and save village hills and paddy fields. They felt that it was necessary to retain the identity and demography of the village. They also demanded protection of beaches, sand dunes, paddy fields, water bodies, agriculture and orchard lands from settlements. Initially people attended just to know what the regional plan was all about, as they feared that it intended to convert their village properties or that they would be 'grabbed' by the state. People feared personal loss of property, losing cattle sheds, paddy fields or even their houses. Uneducated people and otherwise not so interested people now began to attend Gram Sabhas because of fear created by peers. Women came out in large numbers, worried about losing their livelihood. There was a demonstration effect from one villager to another and from one village to another. Earlier intentions were more personal, as they thought in terms of their loss / benefits if the plan was implemented. However increasing participation at the Gram Sabhas saw people becoming aware of the importance of preserving the natural habitat of the village. They realized that they were responsible for maintaining the demography, natural resources, customs, traditions and culture – the identity of their village.

b) Mining woes

This is an issue affecting a few villages, especially in Sanguem and Quepem talukas in South Goa and Sanquelim, Bicholim and Sattari Taluka in North Goa. The mining industry has grown in leaps and bounds. Thousands of trucks carrying mining ore cause traffic congestion and are a major source of pollution. Poorly regulated mining activities have resulted in incessant removal of mud surfaces which have threatened the very demography of the village. Every Gram Sabha in these affected villages has taken up the issue of mining and its negative impact on the village. Members have demanded that the Government withdraw mining rights saying that mining in the locality would leave water contaminated, pose health hazards to the residents and that the large scale filling of fields would render the village prone to flooding during monsoons. The dust pollution caused is also hazardous to people's health causing asthma and lung cancer. Rash and negligent driving by truck

drivers has resulted in the deaths of innocent people. The mining issue is taken up vociferously in the Gram Sabhas and resolutions passed.

c) Voice against Mega projects

The construction Industry has been steadily growing in Goa for more than a decade. In the last couple of years there has been a spurt of construction business especially in coastal areas. These include massive residential projects, huge resorts and the building of industries and companies. These mega projects are an immense strain on inadequate infrastructures such as roads, electricity, water, sewage and solid waste management. The massive cutting down of trees gives a deserted look to villages besides depleting natural resources in the locality. The natural habitat and serenity of the village are destroyed. Since a lot of water is diverted to building and maintaining these mega projects, some of them with provisions like swimming pools, people in the villages are facing chronic water shortage which was never the case ten years earlier. There are frequent power cuts and a major problem of disposal of sewage due to these mega projects, especially when they are residential ones. The traditional drainage system of the villages has been destroyed. There is garbage and plastic menace which is an open invitation to all kinds of health hazards for villagers. Gram Sabhas in Benaulim, Colva and Sao-Josede-Areal in Salcete taluka are witnessing a sustained agitation against mega housing projects for the last two years.

d) Increasing corruption and malpractices at Panchayat level:

Corruption has grown to an alarming proportion at Panchayat level. Its proliferation and the lack of an effective means to investigate, prove and prosecute the corrupt have further aggravated the situation. Red tape coupled with lack of initiative by elected rulers and officials leaves a huge scope for bribe giving/receiving and creates an incentive for corruption. People expect their elected representatives to be committed to village development and to refrain from corruption and other malpractices. All these problems are the result of overlooking and undermining rules and regulations by the Panchayat machinery and neglecting and ignoring the interest of the people.

Many people have started to participate in GS as they lack faith in their elected representatives. Areas where there is a possibility of corruption and

malpractice are issuing of licenses, issuing of No Objection Certificates, licenses especially for Mega Projects, granting Occupancy, issuing various other certificates, construction activities or maintenance and repair work undertaken by the Panchayat.² These corrupt activities need to be curbed and this can be possible if there are alert Gram Sabhas. People have developed certain strategies to make elected representatives answerable. They have started attending the GS and actively participating. They question, criticize and seek answers, making religious and moral appeals in the Gram Sabha, mobilising women's support, forming civic movements etc. This has strengthened the GS which keeps checks on elected leaders, reducing their chances for further malpractices.

Concluding remarks

Every individual has an inalienable right to self-government. To enhance this right it is necessary that there is awareness and realization in people that participation is interesting and beneficial, both for individuals and for the community. There are various reasons which keep people away from participation. However, there are certain important reasons and issues which can motivate people to participate at grassroots. Almost every village in Goa is infested by a particular problem which affects all people of that village, irrespective of class, religion, caste and gender. This has created an initiative and incentive for greater participation. People are realizing that they have a greater role to play in preparing the village plan, prioritizing their needs and mobilizing resources, that they cannot let the present and future of their villages be decided by their representatives and they be mere spectators. There is a growing awareness of their interests and the importance of their involvement. The issues at stake are issues of survival and identity. In general circumstances, people may lie low as far as political participation is concerned. However, when their living, subsistence or identity is at stake, people come out in large numbers to assert themselves. This is changing the whole paradigm of democracy. Though in the initial stages people participated in GS, as they feared that there was a threat to their livelihood and identity, at a later stage by virtue of attending the GS people realized its importance and the role they have to play in it. This awareness led to an impetus to overall change at the grassroots and thus contributed towards greater grassroots democracy. People have now become assertive and want to have a say in various Panchayat-related matters

like new developmental works to be undertaken, issue of licenses to new projects, allocation of various welfare schemes, deciding on the beneficiaries etc. They have also made the elected representatives responsible and answerable to their actions.

Further research is required to confirm whether greater participation also means an enlightened participation, but it is heartening to note an increase in participation of more and more people into the realm of grassroots politics, suggesting that their increased number will offer them increased opportunities to influence local decision-making. Once a group reaches a certain 'critical mass' then its position, power and influence is likely to

increase.³ Thus increases in number will help people to become an effective pressure group through the instrument of collective bargaining. The awareness that problems are not personal/private but affect the whole community has led the villagers to come out as united fronts. Increasing participation is definitely changing the paradigm of democracy at grassroots. It certainly a positive change and one can hope for a brighter future for the state of Goa.

¹ Robert A. Dahl, On Removing certain Impediments to Democracy in the United States', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 92, 1977.

² Salgaonkar S. & Salgaonkar P., Can Gram Sabha Check Corruption at the Grassroots? Study of Goa, *The Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Jan-March, Vol. LVIII, 2012.

³ Lyn, Kathlene, Power and Influence in State Legislative Policy-making, *American Political Science Review*, September, Vol. 88, 1994.

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Creation Date: 26/10/2012 19:37:00

Change Number: 20

Last Saved On: 01/01/2014 17:57:00

Last Saved By: Janet Wilson

Total Editing Time: 1,425 Minutes

Last Printed On: 01/01/2014 17:57:00

As of Last Complete Printing

Number of Pages: 5

Number of Words: 2,986 (approx.)

Number of Characters: 17,021 (approx.)