

People's Participation in Panchayatiraj Institution of Rural West Bengal

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Abstract: Rural India's transition to decentralization is expected to have a substantial societal impact, as it provides a three-tier form of local self-government, the Panchayati raj: at the village, district, and Panchayat Block levels. In Bengal, the state of eastern India, after the administration of the Left Front came into power, there are traces of far-reaching societal transformation, particularly in view of revitalizing a Panchayat system of three levels. In the earliest years of Left Front administration, the village of Sabha, the general voting body spanning 10 to 12 villages and the Gram Sansad, a forum for local democracy at the ward levels, eagerly attended Panchayat meetings and participated in decision-making at the village council level. Today, however, there are very few persons involved in programmes funded by the government. There are few Panchayat meetings attended, with some classes and sectors of the community nearly always excluded. To tackle that issue, the Western Bengal government has recently tried and established Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS) or Village Development Councils, consisting of political members of the elect and opposition parties, as well as certain nominated members, for a further delegation of power and responsibilities to the local government. The CIS should contribute more to grassroots engagement. In this research, we examine the formal policies of decentralisation and people's involvement in Western Bengal and analyse the dynamics of political decision-making processes on an operational level following CIS implementation. We have analysed the audio recordings of Gram Sabhas meetings and the dynamics of the newly established CIS to discover how often people are actually taking part. We propose that solutions lay in a strong third-level to deal with questions of lack of openness and accountability in decision-making and recommend how to do so.

Keywords: Local politics, Civil society, Village development councils, Gram Sansad.

Introduction:

The participation of people has emerged in recent years as a significant tool for development worldwide. The efforts of the public to better the economic, social, cultural and political circumstances in society are linked in a participatory process with the efforts of government authorities. The procedure in turn, makes it easier for local communities to integrate into the life of the nation and allows them to contribute to the country's success. Individuals play an active and decisive role in shaping decisions affecting their life.

The Panchayats have two connected objectives: a) to decentralise power and b) to encourage the participation of the people in development and decision-making. The Panchayat Village (Gram Panchayat or GP) has at least one village member and is divided into 10 to 12 villages. Sometimes when a village is excessively large, it represents more than one member.

There is then a Panchayat Samiti block that covers all Panchayats in a certain block (area). This is the intermediary level between the villages and the district in the Panchayati system. Over the Samiti is a Zila Parishad or a Panchayat body in a district, representing all the Panchayat Samitis. Elects an elector at all three levels to be his or her representative [6].

The Gram Sabha is the general electoral body of peasants working next to the Panchayat village. At the local level it is the decision maker. On a wards level, the Gram Sansad is another platform for local democracy. The electorate is a Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad members alike. It is planned that Gram Sabha will meet at least once a year to debate matters concerning the general village development, while the Sansad will meet twice each year. Regular sessions of Gram Sabha and Sansad are expected to channel local engagement. All persons in the community over 18 years of age must be notified at least one week prior to these gatherings. In order to quorum, ten percent of the villagers must be present. If these meetings do not take place, the Panchayat operations are not approved, and a higher body might suspend the Panchayat. Gram Sabha meetings give ordinary people the opportunity to discuss, approve, reject, and prioritise future action plans in line with their felt needs.

The government of West Bengal adopted two more requirements and the recognition of Gram Sabha as a basis of the Panchayati Raj system. Gram Sabhas were empowered to build Gram Sansad for the purposes of planning and execution in 1994 in view of the 73rd amendment to the Indian constitution, and Gram Sansad was authorised in 2003 to create a Gram Unnayan Samiti (village development council) by revising the Local Government Act of West Bangladesh in every area. These initiatives should promote the participation of the public in the development process and make local governments accountable to the ordinary people [1].

In the investigation of this work, the dynamics of meetings between Gram Sabha and Gram Unnayan Samiti were studied by two methodologies. First, we conducted a phenomenological analysis of the Gram Sabha meetings to examine the gatherings' character. Secondly, in order to examine local concerns linked to Gram Unnayan Samitis training and activities and the level of people's participation, data from the ethnographic field work of nineteen wards with gramme Unnayan samitis in the East Midnapore district were investigated. In this approach, we tried to depict the wider areas of politics and the obvious reluctance of people to take part. We discover that the Gram Sabha and Gram Unnayan Samitis meetings (GUS), which are meant to operate apolitically, have not achieved their objectives [9]. There is an alarmingly low engagement of people in Gram Sabha, with an unintentional politicisation in their areas. A harmful political culture that underlies the lack of interest of individuals has been exposed through the ethnographic research of problems linked to GUS training and activities. The idea that in the politicised state such as West Bengal, where the government of the Left Front has been in power for more than 30 years, a refined third class must be provided here as an explanation for the failure of these two democratic places. Further power transfer via the village councils is not necessarily a better system [2].

Methodology:

As shown above, we have a mixed-method approach for dealing with varied scenarios, for example. Gram Sabha and Gram Unnayan Samiti problems. The combined method has to produce data capable of revealing the key dynamics of both diverse environments. We have recorded the full activities of 44 Gram Sabha meetings for a period of one year in the district of Birbhum, without meddling in free flow events. After the recordings were concluded, written transcripts from the audio files were prepared and the core of the debate analysed. This has led to

an understanding of the larger contextual nature of the voices of people in the discussion about development. We used phenomenology to explain the essential elements of the meetings following Giorgi (1970). We have taken Devanish (2002), and Schweitzer (2002) work to explore an inductive analysis of Georgian phenomenological analysis-inspired transcripts. This analysis was carried out in three steps, reasonably straightforwardly, which allowed to develop essences that contextualise speeches and map local questions in the greater context of public participation in decision-making.

Ethnographical fieldwork in nineteen wards (which comprise the Gram Unnayan Samitis) was done in the East Midnapore district to investigate the efficiency of the Gram Unnayan Samitis. We had interviews with administrators, elected delegates and villages of Panchayat and held discussions. One group discussion followed by individual interviews with diverse stakeholders in each nineteen Sansa dies. The purpose of the research of gramme Unnayan Samiti was to expose the nature of grassroots problems that were related to their formation and functioning but did not limit our fieldwork to any sample of the numbers of individuals interacted with.

Context of West Bengal:

The people involvement in community matters is surely a measure of democracy quality at local level. The more individuals take part in the decision-making, the more democratic the government's system. However, efficient local democracy involves not only involvement but also the political outcome of people's proposals. Even substantial participation may still not create a majority-supported decision-making result or (preferably) all stakeholders involved. It may promote 'pseudo-participation' and, in fact, empower the local elite as part of decentralisation. Each contending party, for example, could be defensive in terms of its own short-run interests during budget decision-making about water projects rather than focusing on what is best for all. The fact that "a (political) regime can depend on its political support" from a certain rural class, and so reward them could result in a discrepancy in the distribution of advantages of rural growth [3].

The issues are the result of "faults in the functioning of a fair electoral process on a local level, low levels of political sensibility for the poor and the proclivity of wealthy organisations to create special interest groups," as argued by Bardhan and Mookherjee. However, decentralisation could be a helpful development by weakening the coherence of interest groups on the local level and increasing voter knowledge and competitiveness. But they caution that local institutions, whether by political leaders or local elites in districts with great inequality and poverty, are vulnerable to 'capture.'

Locals are therefore entrusted with a limited number of responsibilities and relationships in the utilisation of resources, and there is limited autonomy. In his study of two Southern Rajasthan villages in India, Ajay Mehta highlights the political processes inside the Panchayat, which enhance those who already have the authority to "manage and cooperate in the service of the poor." In a study of the Indian State of Kerala, the authors state: "When a party dominates a Panchayat, it primarily recompenses its supporters," although this could eventually be reversed in the elections to Panchayat. In West Bengal, where the Left Front coalition government has been in power for 32 years with the Communist Party of India as the leading political party, participation in decision-making is a complex and political process. Factors outside the village influence local management activity, which leads the decision-making process by political dynamics, foreign sponsorship and networking, and accountability systems between policy

players. The official decentralisation procedures aiming at greater involvement of people in decision-making seem to be a major divergence from what is happening in West Bengal. It seems that the current process simply worsens the incorrect distribution of resources. Satadal Dasgupta (2001) contends that rural Bengal has been polarised into two main categories: landed and landless, and that the political struggle is the class identity of these groups [7]. The work of Harry Blair (2000) indicates the partiality in terms of distribution of rewards because the ruling party wanted to keep some farmers' loyalty and paid them alone. Bhattacharya (1999) shows how local party members' capture' the peasant culture, resulting in distorted decision-making. The poor village that refrain from attending meetings in Gram Sabha does not perceive grassroots engagement as a major route to manage their own resources.

The following are the outcomes of Gram Sabha sessions:

The following measures of the efficiency of Gram Sabha meetings are provided for a detailed analysis of transcripts:

- **Participation of people's:**

As Gram Sabha meetings are for ordinary people, their effectiveness depends significantly on participation by individuals. Data on the involvement of individuals in the Gram Sabhas in 2003-2004 show that an average of 1,120 heads is necessary for quorum attainment yet only 137 people are on average. The Kirnahar Village Panchayat recorded the lowest attendance, the only person there was the leader of the local administration. The annual budget declaration was read out and then the meeting was cancelled. In Kushmore, 1427 heads were present but four were still short of a quorum, was the highest presence found. There is a major lack of involvement in the distance between quarrel and people present and the issue arises: how can meetings continue? We noticed that people collected their signatures in their homes before or after the Sabhas, which produced a misleading quorum record. However, 16 of 43 Village Panchayats have postponed Sabhas and are desperately committed to holding meetings.

- **Meeting time:**

Gram Sabha's approach involves people and discusses local development plans in detail so that the views of the people are represented in their plans and implementation. Time is vital since approval of the plan; budget reviews and social audit are time-consuming tasks [4]. However, it took only on average 38 minutes for our Gram Sabha's studied to conclude the meetings. Karidya Village had the shortest meeting of just five minutes, while Md. Bazar Village had the longest meeting of 112 minutes. We believe that the quality of meetings depends directly on time, yet the average Gram Sabha's length appears to be not enough to achieve the desired duties.

- **In Gram Sabha's meetings the nature of issues addressed:**

We identified the various topics spoken and computed the percentage of Gram Sabha meetings included following the first coding of the transcripts. Figure 1 demonstrates that the majority of the meetings in Gram Sabha are confined to budgetary debate and income expenditure. There has been discussion of future plans at 54% and the priority of plans at only 10%. Over 20 per cent of the Panchayats village have used Gram Sabhas to offer extensive discourses on Panchayats' success tales and on certain political parties [5]. Local leading party workers delivered speeches

in roughly 10% of the Gram Sabhas. Most Gram Sabhas seemed to have failed to incorporate the voices of the people in planning and taking decisions. Political influence in meetings protocols is the most worrying discovery.

- **The polarization of Gram Sabha sessions**

Gram Sabhas are intended to be the ordinary area of the people and, ideally, it is unbiased and apolitical to discuss and include people in planning and decision-making. However, the analyses of the transcript showed that a political speech was given in around 23 percent of the Gram Sabhas. These discourses address three sorts of issues: the ruling party's long history of success, the blame for the failure of the Block and Panchayats villages for political divisions, and comparative success stories and failures when the political party was changed. Who speaks, because this reflects the person who embodies political power, is significant. We observed that in 16% of Gram Sabhas, the high-level political leader is called to speak, generally the Block or the District.

- **Voice suppression:**

As a platform for ordinary citizens, gramme sabhas must rely on the strength of individual voices. When people's voices are heard and incorporated into the decisions that affect their communities, participation is successful. However, the data shows that people's voices in 39% of cases will be abolished and/or overlooked in debates. For instance, women's voices are suppressed and just ignored at first in Mallikpur, Suri.

The interaction shows that other people are neglected save from the last request, which the Village Panchayat was already familiar with. The phenomenological examination of transcripts thus reveals two connected issues: firstly, because people refuse to discuss the participatory agenda, and secondly, because they ignore or suppress the voices of the people. Given the frighteningly low number of participants, each voice deletion will have a significant further unfavourable influence on the participation agenda [8]. There are, therefore no opportunities for people to raise their opinions. There is no official approval process for the suggestions presented by the Panchayat and the politicisation conference. For these reasons, Village Development Councils, Gram Unnayan Samitis, has been promoted by the local administration.

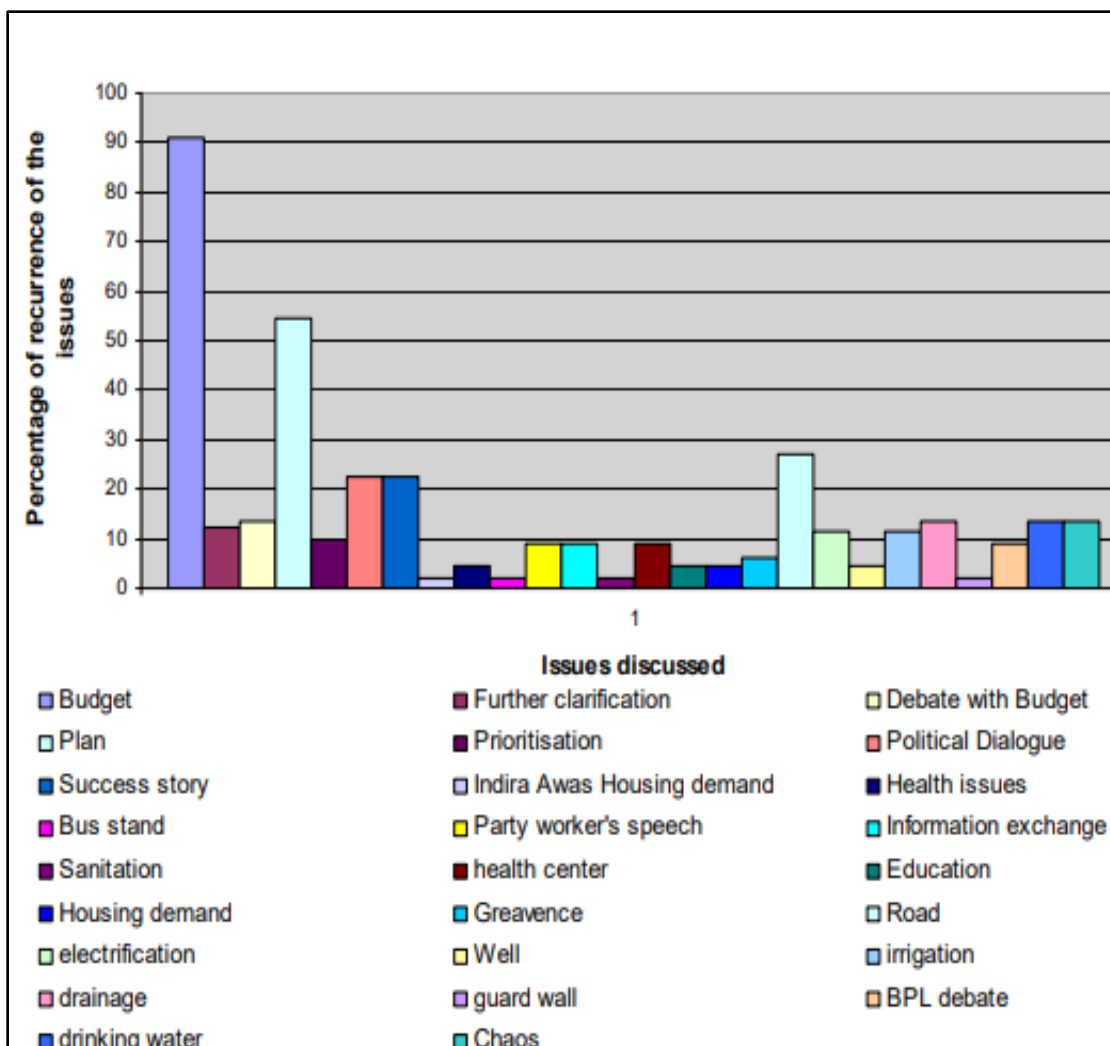


Figure 1. The frequency with which Gram Sabha matters are discussed

Village development councils:

A brief look into Gram Unnayan Samiti (GUS) organisational structure reveals a desire to foster participation by individuals from all sectors, including various political party groups. A municipality in East Midnapore is examined in this section, and the issue of participation in Gram Sabhas is discussed. Local women, an opposition candidate (who lost by the tiniest of margins in the local elections), volunteers of a self-help group, and retired teachers and former employees whose political leanings were not apparent make up the GUS in this district. To establish the GUS, the Secretary of a local administration will preside over a meeting that has been advertised in advance and widely publicised. To be a part of the GUS, the residents of a village must suggest, support, or reject the names of the region's peoples. The goal of the CIS's apolitical structure is to increase local participation in fundamental planning and to improve economy and social fairness. Training in resource database creation, problem identification (and effective problem-solving planning) and plan implementation is beneficial to the council. GUS efforts in six districts, including East Midnapore, were supported by a programme financed by the UK Department of International Development (DFID) that aims to strengthen rural decentralisation. In six areas,

Impacts on programmes:

One of the first steps in the continuation and inception of new plans has been made possible thanks to the CIS's development. The recent rural economic guarantee programmes are being thwarted by some political opponents, such example, who block land access needed to create work. Opponents, on the other hand, had saplings disarmed and protective fencing encircling the plants, which had severely harmed their social forest operation. This was another example. Alternatively, the main and opposition groups of the GUS each sent nearly twice quite so many workers on a rural employment project as were needed.

From the two situations, the following are the most important findings:

The inquiry reveals a number of local problems that symbolise two larger domains: first, the inadvertent politicisation of democratic; and second, the passiveness of citizens. Sections devoted to discussing these difficulties, their dimensions, and the impact they have on local governments will follow.

- **Unintentional policymaking in the democratic space:**

Unintentional politicisation is at the root of the Gram Sabhas' and GUSs' participatory agendas' failure. Lectures given at Gram Sabha sessions are used to set & promote political agendas. The GUS is a good place to start politicking since it is perceived as a place where political power may be exercised. In both cases, the formal procedure has been contaminated by informal party political actions. As the Panchayat System was designed to achieve, political decision-making is essential and could play a constructive role if widespread participation is ensured. Gram Sabhas' low involvement and difficulties implementing the CIS point to a problematic political climate in the rural. An additional consideration is people's fear of being associated with a political party as a result of the open voting procedure. Policy and decision-making are impeded and disengaged by three widespread and equitable participation in planning, implementation, and development programmes. The situation is problematic. There are three methods to approach the situation: As a result, political parties no longer have a duty to represent the interests of the general public.

Although Gram Sabah as well as the GUS are both political issues, the extent to which people are affected is different. Gram Sabha meetings' "simply" value is decreased because of the focus on protocol. Political parties, on the other side, appear to have organised a response to the Gram Unnayan Samiti conflict. As the parties have "numbers" in these situations, this forces individuals to participate in an open voting system in order to support one of two panels. Although there is extensive political intrusion, Gram Sabha will not provide the political party with so incentives and residents are not put under tremendous pressure. These examples show that "managing benefits" is the key political incentive in this country. Options 'arranged' by numerous parties are all people have to choose from.

- **The apathy of the populace:**

There is political engagement in democratic space to be seen in each of these cases. Many people are discovered to be idle and distant, even when this is not in their best interest. Why are we so docile? Failures in collective mobilisation are to blame. A situation where the "facts" are obviously in favour of or against a particular course of action. To cite Georg Lukács's argument:

"The circumstance has never occurred, nor can or will 'facts' speak unequivocally for or against any given line of action."

Change will be difficult to achieve unless a concerted effort is made to galvanise the populace against their apathy.

Conclusion:

Our research supported earlier work on politicalisation of decision making in rural western Bengal by Barhan and Mukherjee (1999) and Satadal Dasgupta (2001), reflecting, among other things, the underlying divisions in the village society, the 'controlling power of knowledge' and the path-dependence flowing through one party's long-term control which makes it self-solidate local authorities.

This study documented the challenges of lack of communication, knowledge (and hence the involvement of the people), the nature of village politics, and open voting procedures. The objectives of GUS in particular, have never been clearly explained to local residents who are not aware that such an organisation is in the area. This unconsciousness has been taken advantage of by political parties, and GUS has become a new power basis, especially for those in Panchayats who lose authority or position. Political polarisation has increased splits in village life: many ordinary people now eschew political participation while others accept the decisions and exercise control by supporters or members of different political parties. A strategy to restore political tranquilly and foster the engagement of citizens in the development process is necessary.

Tactics like power transfer and the promotion of people's involvement do not automatically lead to a better local government system. To increase the system's effectiveness, the Panchayats' administrative branch needs to be strengthened and/or their large-scale, better-informed participation by the common people needs to be strengthened. One possibility is to create a support framework that allows local administrations to participate more effectively at the grassroots level.

Finally, it's crucial to remember that it takes time to change these efforts. A key challenge with development and engagement strategies is that they are begun quickly, often without enough social infrastructure. This leads to failure and sometimes to long-term adverse repercussions. Their goal is to make people actively, partially and less dependent on travel in a society with a long legacy of division and polarisation. These projects are directed towards cultural change. The effort should become slow and steadfast and build on existing arrangements in a culturally appropriate manner so that communal benefits can be changed long-term and sustainably.

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