

# **Gramaa Sabhas in Karnataka – A Step towards Deepening Democracy**

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## **Background:**

***“True democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village”<sup>1</sup>.*** Indian democracy saw a radical transformation in December 1992 through the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, which provided a constitutional mandate to the basic principles of local self-governance. These amendments have had a far reaching impact on the nature of Indian State, governance and peoples’ participation in politics. This envisaged a full-fledged decentralization of democratic governance in the country for the first time and empowered the local bodies with enormous administrative and development powers. Different states in India, however, approached this new reform of decentralization differently with varying views.

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution is a milestone in the evolution of Panchayats in India which carved out the third tier of the Indian Federal (Political) System. While the Panchayats have been the backbone of Indian villages to achieve economic development and social justice in rural areas. The constitutional amendment provided great emphasis to people’s participation in all the spheres of development of the villages through Ward Sabha and Grama Sabha. The Grama Sabha is the grass root level democratic institution constituted at Village Panchayat level. A vibrant Grama Sabha is essential for the effective functioning of Village Panchayats by promoting transparency and accountability in administration, enhancing public participation in the planning and implementation of schemes, in the choice of beneficiaries, and paving the way for social audit.

Grama Sabha which is an entity of constitution of India is legitimized statutory body to do multifaceted work at the village level. The main objective of introducing Grama Sabha is to have decentralized planning and evaluation with peoples participation at the grass root level. The concept of eradication of discrimination and facilitation of people’s participation from all walks of social life in the management of affairs of their locality were the foundation for the

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<sup>1</sup> Harijan, 18-1-1948, p. 519

emergence of comprehensive society called Grama Sabha. Transparency and intimacy becomes part and parcel of their institution.

The realization that people's participation alone can bring sustainable development through good governance at the base level, hence it becomes inevitable that collective wisdom of Grama Sabha guides the Panchayati Raj Institutions in their planning and execution of developmental functions, social auditing as an integral part of Grama Sabha that ensures transparency in administration and accountability of Panchayati Raj Institutions (*ANSSIRD, 2010*).

The significance of Grama Sabha was recognized first by the Maharashtra government as early as in 1959. The Bombay Village Panchayat Act of 1959 provided for a minimum of two meetings of the Grama Sabha to be held in a year. It is obligatory on the part of Panchayat to place before Grama Sabha annual statement of the accounts and report of the administration of the preceding year, the development and progress of works for the ratification of Grama Sabha. The significant role that Grama Sabha could play in Maharashtra can be understood from the fact that Maharashtra land reforms review committee recognized it even in the vital matters like complementation of tenancy acts. Thus, the Grama Sabha is being as visualized as vibrant body of decentralized administration (*Sarada Muraleedharan, 2014*).

Article 243 (B) of the Amendment states that the Grama Sabha is a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of panchayat at the village level. As per Article 243 (A) "A Grama Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a state may, by law, provide."

### **Grama Sabha in Southern States of India:**

The Grama Sabhas are perceived to be the forum for the village community to address their grievances with the elected representatives and officials of the government. Grama Sabhas are the crux of local self-government in providing benefits to the people. The beneficiaries under various housing schemes are chosen in the Grama Sabha meetings.

### **Karnataka:**

The Karnataka Act No.20 of 1958 passed by the erstwhile Janata government introduced the body called Grama Sabha an important competent of decentralized administration without mentioning about the specific functions of Grama Sabha. However, Diwakar Committee (1963) had brought to light the difficulty caused by Grama Sabha as it does not have any constitutional rights to control the functioning of Panchayats at the grass root level. The Karnataka Act reveals that Grama Sabha was expected to prepare and promote more development schemes for the

rural development. But in reality there is no evidence to show that the Grama Sabha had performed the function.

### **Tamil Nadu:**

As per Section 3 of Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act 1994, Grama Sabha is envisaged for every village Panchayat consisting of persons registered in the elector roll released to the Panchayat. In Tamil Nadu, Grama Sabha is an instrument through which public directly enjoy the power and feel the pulse of administration. Collective wisdom of Grama Sabha guides the Panchayat Raj Institutions in their planning and execution of developmental functions. Apart from this social auditing is an integral part of Grama Sabha in Tamil Nadu, which ensures transparency in administration and accountability to all in the village development.

### **Kerala:**

Kerala created a fourth tier in the form of Grama Sabhas equated with the electoral constituency of a Village Panchayat. All the voters of the Ward are members of the Grama Sabha. It is an attempt to create a new set up for direct democracy - involving the people of the ward. The Grama Sabhas have been given clear rights and responsibilities with absolute powers for identification of beneficiaries, strong advisory powers for prioritizing developmental needs and wide powers of social audit.

### **Andhra Pradesh:**

The Andhra Pradesh State has implemented the constitutional provisions regarding Grama Sabha in letter and spirit and necessary provisions were incorporated in the State Panchayat Raj Act 1994 through Section 6. The AP PR Act defines the Grama Sabha as a body constituting all the persons registered in the electoral rolls of a Grama Panchayat; all the registered voters within the purview of a Grama Panchayat are considered as members of Grama Sabha. In accordance with the provisions contained in the section 6 of APPR Act 1994, the Panchayati Raj and Rural Development Department has issued detailed guidelines for conduct of Grama Sabhas through GO M.S. No. 367 dated 28.8.1998.

**Grama Sabha Meetings:**

Grama Sabha can be convened as and when necessary and as many times as possible depending on the need. Grama Sabha meetings are held twice in a year as per statutory provisions in states like Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Punjab, Sikkim, Uttar Pradesh, while it is held 4 times in a year – Quarterly basis in states like Assam, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa and Rajasthan. Grama Sabhas are being held 6 times in a year in Maharashtra and 3 times in Haryana.

**The Ground Realities - Grama Sabha Issues in Karnataka**

The Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993 stressed the need for active functioning of Ward/Grama Sabha. The Grama Sabha – prominently known as 'People's Sabha', enables every voter of the village to participate in the decision making process at the local level. Grama Sabha is the platform for people to meet and discuss their problems and looking at the best needs of the society and the community, debates and analyses the development and administrative actions of the elected representatives. Grama Sabha also entails transparency and accountability of all government schemes and try to ensure emphasis to be laid out on each and every voter of the Grama Panchayat. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1959, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India laid the foundations of Panchayati Raj at Naguar in Rajasthan and in 2009, the Panchayati Raj Institutions have completed fifty years of its inception. The Golden jubilee Celebrations were marked with the observance of year 2009-10 as 'The Year of the Grama Sabha'.

The Grama Panchayat is the implementing agency of all programmes and projects of both the State and Central government. Grama Sabhas are accountability structures in the overall local self-government structures. Conducting Grama Sabha meetings is vital for identification of beneficiaries and for knowing the felt needs for preparing the plan. The institution of Grama Sabha has been essentially conceived to enable the village panchayats to provide a concrete shape to the felt needs and aspirations of the village community. But, theoretically, this seems to be a myth as Grama Sabha have been regarded as a mere function of the Grama Panchayat. The Grama Panchayat is not obligatory to consider the suggestions and recommendations of the Grama Sabha.

## **Ward Sabha and Grama Sabha (KPR Act, 1993):**

### **Ward Sabha:**

**Ward Sabha:** As per Section (42-A) of the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, "**Ward Sabha**" is a body consisting of persons registered in the voters list each Grama Panchayat Constituency.

**Section 3. Ward Sabha.** - (1) Subject to the general orders of the Government, Ward Sabha shall meet atleast once in six months. (2) The quorum for the meeting of a Ward Sabha shall be not less than one tenth of the total number of members of the Ward Sabha or twenty members whichever is less. As far as may be, not less than thirty percent of the voters attending the Ward Sabha, shall be women. As far as may be the persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes shall be represented in proportion to their population in the Ward Sabha."

Ward Sabha shall, subject to such rules as may be prescribed, exercise the following powers and discharge the following functions, namely:-

- a) to generate proposals and determine the priority of schemes and development programmes to be implemented in the area of the Ward Sabha and forward the same to place it before the Grama Sabha for inclusion in Grama Panchayat development plan;
- b) to identify the most eligible persons from the area of Ward Sabha for beneficiary oriented schemes on the basis of criteria fixed and prepare a list of eligible beneficiaries in the order of priority and forward the same to the Grama Panchayat for inclusion in its development plan;
- c) to verify the eligibility of persons getting various kinds of welfare assistance from Government such as pensions and subsidies;
- d) to get information from the officers of the Grama Panchayat as to the services they will render and the works they propose to do in the succeeding period of six months after the meeting of the Ward Sabha;
- e) to get information from the Grama Panchayat on the rational of every decision of the Grama Panchayat concerning the area of the Ward Sabha;
- f) to get information from the Grama Panchayat on the follow up action taken on the decisions of the Ward Sabha;
- g) to provide and mobilize voluntary labor and contributions in cash and kind for development work and supervise such development works through volunteer teams;
- h) to make efforts to ensure that the members of Ward Sabha pay taxes and repay loans to the Grama Panchayat;

- i) to suggest the location of streetlights, street or community water taps, public wells, public sanitation units, irrigation facilities and such other public amenity schemes within the area of the Ward Sabha;
- j) to identify the deficiencies in the water supply and street lighting arrangements in the area of Ward Sabha and suggest remedial measures;
- k) to impart awareness on matters of public interest such as cleanliness, preservation of the environment and prevention of pollution;
- l) to assist the employees of the Grama Panchayat in sanitation arrangements in the area of Ward Sabha and render voluntary service in the removal of garbage;
- m) to promote programme of adult education within the area of Ward Sabha;
- n) to assist the activities of public health centers in the area of Ward Sabha especially in disease prevention and family welfare and to create arrangements to quickly report the incidence of epidemics and natural calamities;
- o) to promote harmony and unity among various groups of people in the area of the Ward Sabha and to arrange cultural festivals and sports meets to give expression to the talents of the people of the locality; and
- p) to exercise such other powers and discharge such other functions as may be prescribed.

Every meeting of a Ward Sabha shall be presided over by the member of the Grama Panchayat elected from the area of the concerned Ward Sabha and in his absence by any other member of the Grama Panchayat nominated by it. All resolutions in respect of any issue in the meeting of the Ward Sabha shall be passed by a majority of the members present and voting.

**Grama Sabha(KPR Act, 1993):**

**Grama Sabha:** As per Section (16) of the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, "**Grama Sabha**" is a body consisting of persons registered in the voters list of a Grama Panchayat.

**3A. Grama Sabha.-** (1) The Grama Sabha shall meet at least once in six months: Provided that a Special meeting of the Grama Sabha shall be convened if a request is made by not less than ten percent of the members of the Grama Sabha with items of agenda specified in such request and there shall be a minimum three months period between two special meetings of the Grama Sabha. (2) The quorum for the meeting of a Grama Sabha shall be not less than one tenth of the total number of members of the Grama Sabha, or hundred members, whichever is less. As far as may be, at least ten members from each Ward Sabha within the Panchayat area shall attend the meeting and not less than thirty percent of the members attending the Grama Sabha shall be women. As far as may be the persons belonging to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes shall be represented in proportion to their population in the Grama Sabha.

Subject to such rules as may be prescribed, the Grama Sabha, shall exercise powers and discharge functions as hereinafter provided, namely:-

- a) to consider and approve the annual plan prepared by the Grama Panchayat;
- b) to generate proposals and determine the priority of all schemes and development programmes to be implemented in the Panchayat area by the Zilla Panchayat or Taluk Panchayat after considering the recommendations and suggestions of the Ward Sabhas through the Grama Panchayat;
- c) to identify and select the most eligible persons from the Panchayat area for beneficiary oriented schemes on the basis of criteria fixed by the Grama Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat, Zilla Panchayat or the Government and to prepare list of beneficiaries in the order of priority after considering the priority lists of individual beneficiaries sent by the Ward Sabhas. Such list shall be binding on the concerned Grama Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat, Zilla Panchayat or the Government, as the case may be;
- d) to disseminate information on development and welfare programmes and to render assistance in effective implementation of development schemes by providing facilities locally available and to provide feedback on the performance of the same;
- e) to render assistance to the Grama Panchayat in collection and compilation of details required, formulation of development plans, collection of essential socio-economic data and canvassing participation in health, literacy and similar development campaigns;
- f) to get information from the officers of the Grama Panchayat as to the services they will render and the works they propose to do in the succeeding period of six months after the meeting of the Grama Sabha;
- g) to get information from the Grama Panchayat on the rationale of every decision of the Grama Panchayat concerning the Panchayat area;
- h) to get information from the Grama Panchayat on the follow up action taken on the decisions of the Grama Sabha;
- i) to provide and mobilize voluntary labour and contributions in cash and kind for development works and to supervise such development works through volunteer teams;
- j) to resort to persuasion of Grama Sabha members to pay taxes and repay loans to the Grama panchayat;
- k) to decide, after considering the suggestions of the ward sabhas the location of street lights, street or community water taps, Public wells, Public sanitation units, irrigation facilities and such other Public amenity schemes and to identify the deficiencies in them and after considering the suggestions of the ward sabhas to suggest the remedial measures and to report the satisfactory completion of the works;
- l) to impart awareness on matters of public interest such as cleanliness, preservation of environment and prevention of pollution;

- m) to assist employees of the Grama panchayat in sanitation arrangements in the panchayat area and to render voluntary service in the removal of garbage;
- n) to promote the programme of adult education within the Panchayat area;
- o) to assist the activities of school betterment sanghas, Anganawadi, Mahilasamaja, Youth associations, self-help groups, women activities in the Panchayat area;
- p) to assist the activities of public health centres in the panchayat area, especially in disease prevention and family welfare population control and control of cattle diseases and create arrangement to quickly report the incidence of epidemics and natural calamities;
- q) to promote communal harmony and unity among various groups of people in the Panchayat area and to arrange cultural festivals literary activities and sports meets to give expression to the talents of the people of the locality; and
- r) to conserve and maintain public properties such as Gomala, tanks, tank beds, ground water, grazing grounds of the cattle, mines etc., within the limits of the Grama Panchayats;
- s) to take action to prevent discrimination on the basis of caste, religion and sex etc., and to direct the Grama Panchayats to not to grant license to shops vending liquor or narcotic drugs or place of gambling or any other activities prejudicial to public interest;
- t) to identify the child laborers if any, present within the limits of the Grama Panchayats and to take action to rehabilitate them and to assist in implementation of the legal action specified by the Central and State Governments;
- u) To exercise such other powers or discharge such other functions as may be prescribed.

The Grama Sabha shall in its ordinary meeting or a special meeting convened for the purpose, discuss the budgetary provisions, the details of plan outlay and the subject wise allocation of funds and also the details of the estimate and cost of materials of the works executed or proposed to be executed in the Panchayat area. The annual statement of accounts of the preceding financial year, the last audit note and replies thereto and the panchayat jamabandi report and action taken thereto shall be placed by the Grama Panchayat for the consideration of the Grama Sabha in its meeting. The views, recommendations or suggestions of the Grama Sabha shall be communicated to the Grama Panchayat (*Shikha Jha, 2002*). The Grama Panchayat shall give due consideration to the views, recommendations and suggestions of the Grama Sabha. The procedure for convening and conducting the meeting of the Grama Sabha shall be such as may be prescribed. Every meeting of a Grama Sabha shall be presided over by the Adhyaksha of the concerned Grama Panchayat and in his absence by the Upadhyaksha and in the absence of both Adhyaksha and Upadhyaksha, by any member of the Grama Panchayat nominated by it.

The officers of the Grama Panchayat shall attend the meetings of the Grama Sabha as may be required by the Adhyaksha and an officer specifically nominated by the Grama Panchayat as convener of the Grama Sabha meeting shall assist in convening and conducting its meetings and recording its decisions in a minute book and also in taking follow up action thereon.

The Grama Sabha may constitute sub-committees consisting of not less than ten members of whom not less than half shall be women, for in-depth discussion on issues and programmes for effective implementation of decisions of the Grama Sabha and in furtherance of exercise of powers and discharge of functions of Grama Sabha. All resolutions in respect of any issue in the meetings of the Grama Sabha shall be passed by the majority of the members present and voting.

### **Status of Grama Sabha:**

There seems to be a thorough going consensus and hue and cry on the importance of Grama Sabha in local self-government structures. The notion of Grama Sabhas as mere intricacies of validation of schemes and programmes has been waded upon by the current representatives of the Grama Panchayats. The World Bank (2005) study on four South Indian states revealed that only 20 per cent of the household respondents ever attended the Grama Sabha. This has been so much so that many a time Grama Sabhas are postponed by the representatives themselves for want of quorum and/or presence of officials of the government agencies. This triggered the need to study the efficacy and functioning of Grama Sabhas in Karnataka. It is observed that being a strong weapon for true decentralization, Grama Sabha is not functioning up to the expectation due to so many reasons like lack of effective participation, political influences, coordination problems, policy issues etc. Theoretically, the Grama Sabha is perceived as a forum for people's participation in local governance and planning, and for ensuring transparency in administration. Set in this backdrop, this paper throws light on the functions, responsibilities of Grama Sabha while analyzing both positive and negative aspects of their functioning in Karnataka and offers suggestions for the empowerment and effectiveness.

The basic premise was to look at:

- The quality of Grama Sabha functioning.
- The role played by Grama Sabha in Programme Planning and Implementation
- Attendance in Grama Sabha meetings
- Number of Grama Sabha meetings conducted
- Level of Need based dev. planning involving Grama Sabha
- Level of awareness about Development programme & Social Audit

- Awareness about duty of Grama Panchayat

### **Objective of the Paper:**

***“A society must be built in which every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its own affairs... Independence begins at the bottom”***

–Mahatma Gandhi.

Grama Sabha is one of the integral and central features of the 73rd Amendment and it is also seen as a means to ensure direct democracy in rural areas. The Grama Panchayats ought to consent the decisions taken up in the Grama Sabha. But, in reality, it appears to be rhetoric that it is not the way it has to be. This is primarily because it is not obligatory for the panchayats to implement or execute the decisions of Grama Sabha. Time and again, there have been hue and cry on implementing plans and executing the programme on a ‘bottoms up approach’, but the current scenario does not substantiate the need for empowered Grama Sabhas. With these questions in mind, the study looked at responses to the following queries:

- ? To find out the awareness among the community about Grama Sabha.
- ? To explore participation of people in decision making process in Grama Sabha and rural development.
- ? To explore the participation of women and marginalized sections of the community in Grama Sabhas
- ? To examine the nature of issues discussed, analyzed and prioritized in the Grama Sabha meetings
- ? To analyse the selection of beneficiaries and formulation of the list of beneficiaries eligible to avail schemes of the Government

### **Methodology:**

The selection of the Grama Panchayat was made through sampling method and the remoteness of the Grama Panchayat. The study also involved analyzing the Grama Sabhas on a positive and negative note. Hence, of the five Grama Panchayats in each district, three Grama Panchayats denoted the positive aspects of good governance and functioning of Grama Sabhas, while two denoted the intricacies of caste factor, elite capture, non-responsiveness of the community, lack of awareness and corruption thus hindering the effective performance of the Grama Sabhas.

The support of civil society organizations and existing federations working in the taluks were also looked at. It was noted that many civil society organizations have been working on enhancing the capabilities of Elected Women Representatives of the Grama Panchayats thus ensuring in effective functioning of Grama Sabhas. The study also resulted in identifying the

role of SUGRAMA<sup>2</sup> in ensuring active participation of women in Grama Sabhas. There was a need to look at whether women's participation in public spaces is increasingly becoming more visible. Hence, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with the women leaders to know the extent of their participation, their role in decision making, etc.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also held with the community to ascertain the levels of awareness, their participation and the leverage of external forces in Grama Sabhas. The period of analysis covers the Grama Sabhas conducted during the period 2012-13 and 2013-14; data regarding the Grama Sabhas held earlier were also collated.

#### **Selected sites:**

As part of the sampling process, 30 GPs were selected from 10 taluks of four districts of Karnataka. Following were the Grama Panchayats selected:

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Name of the Grama Panchayat</b>	<b>Taluk</b>	<b>District</b>
1	<b>Irasawadi</b>	Chamarajanagar	Chamarajanagar
2	Jyothigowdanapura		
3	Nagavalli		
4	<b>Helsuru</b>	Gundlupet	
5	Bannitalapura		
6	Somahalli		
7	<b>Chowdlu</b>	Somawarapet	Kodagu
8	Kodlipete		
9	Mullusoge		
10	<b>Ponnappa Santhe</b>	Virajapet	

<sup>2</sup> SUGRAMA is a federation representing the rights and interests of Elected Women Representatives of Grama Panchayats of Karnataka. A membership based organization, SUGRAMA is a platform where women members can come together in solidarity and support each other to bring about change and advocate for better policies. [www.SUGRAMA.org](http://www.SUGRAMA.org)

11	Betoli		
12	Kannangala		
13	<b>Hebbalu</b>	K.R. Nagara	Mysore
14	Mirle		
15	Mayigondanahalli		
16	Hampapura		
17	Nooralakuppe		
18	Savve		
19	Hairige		
20	Panchavalli	Piriyapatna	
21	<b>Malangi</b>		
22	<b>Aralakuppe</b>	Pandavapura	
23	Bannangadi		
24	<b>Gummanahalli</b>		
25	Kothathi	Mandya	
26	Santhekelasagere		
27	<b>Alkere</b>		
28	Aluru	Maddur	
29	Bidarakote		
30	<b>Hosagavi</b>		

The Grama Panchayats (marked in bold) though conducted Grama Sabhas, they have not been effective. The study thus looked at the reasons behind the lack of effective functioning

of Grama Sabhas in these Panchayats. Of the 30 Grama Panchayats, 4 Grama Panchayats were also selected as the project areas for conducting of Mahila Grama Sabhas (during the year 2013) as envisaged by the partnership between UN-Women and Government of Karnataka.

### Conduct of Grama Sabhas:

The study looked at conducting Grama Sabhas as constitutionally mandated and the participation of the community in Grama Sabhas. Besides, there was also a need to look at the issues deliberated at the Grama Sabhas.

Districts	No. of Grama Panchayats	No. of Grama Sabhas held	No. of participants (per GP)		Issues Discussed	Presence of Department Officials
			Men	Women		
Mandya	9	20	170	210	Housing, sanitation, child marriage, female feticide, pensions	Yes in some areas
Mysore	9	18	246	253	Housing, NREGA	Yes in some areas
Chamarajanagar	6	14	136	145	Water, Sanitation, NREGA, NBA – toilets, housing, pensions	Yes in some areas
Kodagu	6	12	89	104	Housing, NREGA, child marriage, social audit	Yes in some areas

### Findings of the Study:

#### Participation Rate:

Participation rate is the proportion of voters that participated in the Grama Sabhas, which is a more reliable yardstick of participation. The participation of women in Grama Sabhas in Karnataka was 35.7 per cent of the participants according to Crook and Manor (1998). As may be seen, there has been an increase in the participation of women in Grama Sabhas. This clearly overwrites the 'myth' of participation of women in Grama Sabhas. Perhaps, the existence of civil society organizations and the role played by SUGRAMA has enabled in increase in participation of women in Grama Sabhas. A majority of the male members and the community have opined that women members are attending the meetings regularly. It shows

that women members are very interested in taking decisions and initiating developmental activities through attending the Grama Sabhas. The developmental initiatives indicate the programmes of rural development technique used to implement this programmes with qualitative manner.

### **Awareness:**

The level of awareness on Grama Sabhas was also looked at. It was found that majority of the respondents - 94.78 percent were aware of Grama Sabha concept which shows that there is good sign of people's participation in discussing about rural development activities. While the others contemplated on no information about the conduct of Grama Sabhas. The effective usage of mike systems, vehicles, etc. to pass the message on conduct of Grama Sabhas have ensured a good participation of the community in the Grama Sabhas.

### **The Grama Sabhas:**

Grama Sabhas may be broadly classified into three, based on purpose- a) planning b) beneficiary selection c) others. The Grama Sabhas are also called for other routine functions. 84.70 percent respondents opined that Grama Sabha is the best platform to discuss about rural development activities; only 7.65 percent of respondents affirmed their discontent over the conduct of Grama Sabhas.

The field data revealed that in good number of cases the Grama Sabha meetings were held mainly to identify and select beneficiaries. The role of SUGRAMA has been exemplary as majority of the women and the elected women representatives have taken due attention to the selection of suitable beneficiaries for the housing schemes. Some of the illustrations are cited below.

- The Grama Sabha held on 28/1/2012 (Jyothigowdanapura Grama panchayat) saw 38 women, 120 men and 18 officials representing the departments participating in the Grama Sabha. In this meeting about 200 needy families were selected for availing the benefits under **Basava Indira Vasathi Yojane**.
- The above Grama Panchayat also conducted a Grama Sabha to plan and prioritize developmental activities under MGNREGA and selection of beneficiaries under housing schemes and Nirmala Bharat Abiyana on September 27, 2013.

**The Hunger Project**<sup>3</sup> with its partner organization, **Organization for the Development of People (ODP), Mysore and ASEDA, Chickballapura** has been working on enhancing the participation of women in Grama Sabhas besides creating awareness on the importance of Grama Sabhas.

- Following the programmes, it was noted that Grama Sabhas were not being held in a proper manner in **Bidarakote and Hosagavi** Grama Panchayats. The SUGRAMA members along with SHG members collectively submitted a memorandum to the Executive Officer of Maddur taluk and ensured that the Grama Sabhas are held effectively. Accordingly, the Grama Sabha conducted in November 2013, saw the participation of 12 departmental officials, 70 male and 85 women members attending the Grama Sabha.
- The Grama Sabha held at Hebbasur Grama Panchayat on September 28, 2013 was convened primarily to conduct Jamabhandi – social audit of MGNREGA scheme. Though initial response saw the non-callousness attitude of the male members to participate, the increased participation of women enthused the men also to participate.
- The special Grama Sabha at Nagavalli Grama Panchayat ensured proper planning and prioritizing of developmental activities for implementing the Suvarna Grama Yojane. The Panchayat also conducted its annual Social audit and Grama Sabha on November 13, 2013. At the Grama Sabha, discussions pertaining to supply of water was also discussed. This led to altercations between the communities regarding installation of water tanks. The woman president and member Puttamma was successful in getting approval for installing water tanks in SC/ST colonies.
- The Grama Sabha at Aralakuppe held on December 12, 2013 primarily looked at planning the activities under MGNREGA, selection of beneficiaries for construction of toilets under MGNREGA and self-employment training opportunities under Rajiv Gandhi Chaitanya Yojana. But, the participation of the community was not satisfactory. The annual social audit was also conducted on August 26, 2013, which was eventually postponed to September 30, 2013. The social audit for MGNREGA was also conducted on September 10, 2013.
- Bannangadi Grama Panchayat conducted its Grama Sabha on September 30, 2013 to review the progress and conducting of social audit. Of the 140 members present, 40 women participated in the Grama Sabha. A similar Grama Sabha was held on January 4,

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<sup>3</sup> The Hunger Project works in 8 states in India to build and strengthen the leadership of elected women representatives in village Panchayats so that they are able to access and demand rights and entitlements and ensure good governance and transparency in their Panchayats.

2014 wherein the members demanded the punishment and removal of Panchayat Development Officer for misusing of funds of MGNREGA. The PDO was ordered to pay the money (Rs. 8,500/-) within a month.

- Issues of misappropriation of funds were also found out by the members of Santhekehalagere Grama Panchayat. The discussions in the Grama Sabha held on January 6, 2014 revealed the misappropriation by the earlier President during her tenure.
- The Grama Sabha held at Kothathi on February 1, 2014 primarily looked at the preparation of budgets and discussions on planning developmental activities. Of the 120 people, 30 were women.
- Mayigondanahalli Grama Panchayat has also been awarded for its excellence in good governance. The members, under the leadership of Rukmini, were also successful in identifying and selecting beneficiaries for availing 363 toilets.
- Mirle Grama Panchayat showed the courage of postponing Grama Sabha in the year and conducting it again and undertook reselection of eligible beneficiaries under the housing schemes. This resulted in selection of beneficiaries and distribution of 200 houses.
- Mullusoge Grama Panchayat and Neelagondahalli Grama Panchayat in its Grama Sabha meeting rectified the misappropriation of funds (Rs. 18 lakhs) in the MGNREGA scheme. The ERs especially the EWRs of the GP conducted the Grama Sabha with the order of Chief Executive Officer and were successful in rectifying the issue.
- At a parallel level, discussions were held with EWRs of Neelagondanahalli Grama Panchayat and Yele Ramapura Grama Panchayat of Koratagere taluk, Tumkur and D.Palya Grama Panchayat of Guaribidanur Taluk, Chickballapur District. Some of the members had also participated in the workshop at Gandhigram Rural Institute, Madurai in the month of March 2014.
- As members perceive, the Grama Sabhas are conducted twice in a year. As such, the month of conducting Grama Sabhas shall be primarily a month to conduct Grama Sabhas in all GPs consecutively. In this manner, all the GPs shall be covered. The members perceive that by conducting Grama Sabhas in such a manner, it has become a 'namesake' Grama Sabhas, as the representatives of the Departments do not attend. It is only the nodal officers who represent the Grama Sabhas.
- The Grama Sabhas also see people drunk to disrupt the proceedings of the Grama Sabha. This is also one of the reason that women fear to participate in Grama Sabhas.

### **Women Grama Sabha – Mahila Grama Sabhas:**

During the month of June 2013, women Grama Sabhas were held in Hebbalu Grama Panchayat wherein the Grama Sabha saw the participation of 300 women and 9 officials from the departments. The issues ranged from housing, income generating activities and toilets to the poor. The members also submitted 4 memorandums seeking the completion of unfinished toilets. Mahila Grama Sabhas were also held successfully in Hamapapura of K.R. Nagar Taluk and Nooralakuppe of H.D. Kote Taluk. The interesting points of discussion were on violence against women and sale of arrack illegally. The Grama Sabha members and SUGRAMA members were successful in shifting the arrack shops and raiding 2 shops resulting in its closure. The members of Kothathi Grama Panchayat under the leadership of Shakuntala were successful in providing pensions to the poor, old, handicapped and widow pensions at the Grama Sabha. Mahila Grama Sabhas were also held at Mayigondanahalli culminating with Women's Day celebrations. Mahila Grama Sabha was also conducted in Lalandevanahalli Grama Panchayat.

### **Children Grama Sabha – Makkala Grama Sabha:**

The study also revealed that Makkala Grama Sabhas were held in Nagavalli GP of Chamarajanagar and Aluru of Mandya taluk. The Grama Sabha held at Aluru in February 2013 also witnessed hue and cry over the decision of parents to conduct a child marriage. The Grama Sabha was successful in stopping the child marriage. Kothathi Grama Sabha also conducted a Makkala Grama Sabha on February 1, 2014 wherein awareness was provided to children on nutritional aspects, sanitation, child marriage, female feticide, bonded labour, school drop-outs, etc. The Grama Sabha saw the active participation of 75 school children besides men and women and anganawadi teachers. At a parallel level, the study also looked at other studies conducted with respect to Grama Sabhas. Action Aid, undertook field studies in Maravante and Madamake Grama Panchayats in Kundapur Taluk, Udupi District, Melinabesige Grama Panchayat, Hosnagara Taluk, Shimoga District and the Udupi Taluk Panchayat (*Sivanna, 2014*). The Makkala Grama Sabha has been meeting regularly and taking note of issues of the children. The discussions are video recorded and documented meticulously. It was heartening to note that the children in addition to raising issues of their interests, also took up issues of roads, hygiene, sanitation, electricity, water, mid-day meal scheme, etc. The proceedings thus show the preparedness of the Makkala Grama Sabha. The Grama Sabha at Neelagondanahalli Grama Panchayat has taken note of the issues of children. The Grama Panchayat D. Palya also conducted a Makkala Grama Sabha. This was found crucial with the incidents of children falling into the sambar vessels in a school in the Panchayat limits. The Grama Sabha looked at ensuring safety measures so that children are not allowed in kitchen or in the serving areas.

## Other Findings:

75.29 percent respondents opined that casteism, partiality, and nepotism are common in selecting beneficiary. Majority of the respondents opined that the decisions of Grama Sabha were not being implemented fully. About 52 percent of the respondents also opined that Grama Sabhas are not held in a systematic manner. The respondents also opined that the nodal officers and department officials do not participate and only send in their representatives. About 67 percent of the respondents belonging to Chamarajanagar district opined that the Grama Sabhas are held without due information to the community and the elite plays a pivotal role in the selection of beneficiaries. The average number of villagers participating in the Grama Sabhas stabilized to 140 – 150. Special attention was given to women's participation and it ranged from 37 percent to 52 percent. On an average, any Grama Sabha had a minimum participation of 40 percent.

The Grama Sabha meetings are conducted for the sake of fulfilling the administrative formalities. The deliberations are all based on the guidelines of the government and the schemes and hence, the community has very little space for discussions. The proceedings generally are in the hands of elders and influential persons commonly known as big-wigs, while the marginalized sections of population and women have no role to play in the Grama Sabha proceedings.

While Grama Panchayats are represented by Grama Panchayat members – Elected Representatives and officials, Grama Sabha represents the people. But, there seems to be little coordination between the Grama Panchayat and Grama Sabha. This is primarily because the Grama Panchayat implements and executes the plans and programmes according to the representations of the elected body. It gives very little space for decisions taken in Grama Sabha. In this manner, there is a lacunae of one-to-one responsibility and accountability (*ANSSIRD, 2010*). Thus, the participation of the community not only has seen a decline but also of the planning process.

Women continue to be humiliated and divided in decision making process. About 56.35 percent women affirmed that though they ensure that Grama Sabhas take place as mandated, the decision makers are primarily the men. The women have no role to play in prioritizing the developmental activities. The Grama Sabhas also give more focus to developmental activities but not on safeguarding the rights of women and children, states Kalavathi of Hampapura Grama Panchayat; Women Presidents bear the maximum brunt in Grama Sabhas. If the woman president foregoes the decisions of the body and favors the community, she is shown the path in the next Grama Panchayat. The members collectively stand against her and pass 'no-confidence motion' to remove her from the post. Secondly, she faces humiliation in the panchayat leading to her family. The same could also be seen in case of Yalawar and Hanasi Grama Panchayats of Jewargi District.

The study also noted that the selection of beneficiaries is not done properly as per the rules of Grama Sabhas. All is not well in Grama Sabhas. Some Panchayats in spite of efforts to make Grama Sabha a participatory one, the Grama Sabha has seen the elite capture the major decisions especially in the selection of beneficiaries. Also, the caste factor plays a major role during the selection process. The Grama Sabha members of Hosagavi opined that a majority of (87 percent) dare not take part in the Grama Sabha proceedings as they fear of dire consequences, especially during the process of selection of beneficiaries. In spite, the Grama Panchayat's efforts to make the Grama Sabhas accountable, there is a great weightage given to the elite – top level representatives.

The public lack confidence in politicians and in governance which leads to the limited participation. The leadership quality of the Elected Representatives is a challenge which diminishes the quality of preparatory works that becomes one of the major reasons of Grama Sabha's failures. Moreover, Elected Representatives reluctantly agreed that Grama Sabha quorum is a matter of mere adjustment with signatures of members taken quite in advance. Some Elected Representatives fear that if Grama Sabha is not conducted systematically, many of the political agenda may not work.

### **How Grama Sabha can be empowered?**

The Grama Sabha is the key factor in making the Grama Panchayat play its role and be responsible. It plays an important role in keeping an eye on the elected representatives and in making them responsible to the persons who elected them. The year 2010 was declared as the 'year of Grama Sabha', but the importance of Grama Sabhas seems to be diluting. If the Grama Sabhas are conducted systematically with the active participation of people many corruption problems can be reduced and the practice of good governance would be enhanced (ANSSIRD, 2010). The powers and rights of Grama Sabha show that it can be used as a weapon for good governance. But the aforementioned issues and problems make this weapon unutilized or underutilized effectively for the benefit of others than the public and is getting rusted. A team effort is required by the people, elected representatives and Grama Panchayat staff to empower Grama Sabha as envisaged by Mahatma Gandhi. More over some changes in the policies and capacity building activities will also contribute to it.

The political parties should consider public interest instead of political interest. Even the selection of candidate for the election is very important. The ward member should be assertive, active and work for the '*Probono publico*' (i.e. for the benefit of people). And these parties should show dignity by not influencing ward member's decisions or not directing to take unethical decision, if he is balanced, transparent and maintain equity (KILA, 2005). The Grama Sabha meetings should be informed about the resources and problems at the time of planning. All the Grama Sabha members have to be informed in advance about the date, time and venue

of the meeting. The venue must be a convenient place for all the members to come together. Finally, the prime responsibility of all ward members is to convene Grama Sabha effectively.

As L.C. Jain pointed out, ***'True democracy and inclusiveness can be achieved only with bottom-up planning and effective conduct of Grama Sabhas'*** (L.C. Jain, 1994). Grama Sabhas can be empowered through excessive awareness about its importance to the community. The Grama Panchayat could evolve more strategies to invoke people's participation in Grama Sabhas. There is a strong need to bridge the gap between the people – community and the Grama Panchayat. The State Panchayat Acts should be amended to make the recommendations put-forth by the Grama Sabha as mandatory on the Grama panchayats like it is done in scheduled areas (PESA Act,1996), where the Grama panchayats are made answerable and accountable to their Grama Sabhas. But, leverage can be given to the Grama Panchayats to consent or dissent the decisions of Grama Sabhas within the framework of rules and guidelines.

As to the selection of beneficiaries, the Grama Panchayats should ensure proper steps are taken to enlist the selection in a transparent manner at the Grama Sabhas, and such selection shall be tended as final list with no room for changes.

The Grama Sabhas to be made powerful requires the strengthening of Grama Panchayats so that they are in a position to implement the plans approved by the Grama Sabhas. Deepening democracy and inclusive growth should go hand-in-hand for effective development. Success of democracy lies in the up-liftment of marginalized sections of the population. Committees could also be constituted under the leadership of ward members wherein the people can take part actively in Grama Sabhas and ensure maximum participation of the people (Malini Nambiar, 2001). It can be seen that most of the states have not shown interest in constituting sub-committees in the Grama Sabhas. Few states like Bihar, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Rajasthan and Tripura have formulated vigilance committees to ensure transparency at the grass root democracy (ANSSIRD, 2010).

Also, the role of civil society organizations, yuvaka sanghas, sthree shakti groups also play a pivotal role in ensuring greater participation of women and the marginalized in the Grama Sabha meetings. Some of these institutions can also assume the role of facilitators of the Grama Sabha and form a link between the Grama Panchayat and Grama Sabha. As the study reveals, most of the community is unaware of holding a Grama Sabha and hence fail to attend the meetings. Also, the venue and time have been a cause of concern for many of the respondents. The respondents affirm that the venue should be people friendly, easily accessible and convivial to all religious practices. There is also need for using other techniques such as street plays, nukkad natak, songs, visual and print medium to ensure passing the message of importance of Grama Sabha (Sarada Muraleedharan, 2014).

The Hunger Project in its activity – Grama Sabha Mobilization ensured that the techniques and methods are used to ensure greater participation of women in Grama Sabha. The SUGRAMA members who were also part of the activity, went around villages and raised awareness on the importance of Grama Sabhas. Such initiatives shall empower Grama Sabha to be more people friendly and accountable to the people. Further the system of 'recall' (as is in the case of Madhya Pradesh) could also be introduced.

The need for expanding horizons of the Grama Sabha also seems to be tenable. The Grama Panchayat should also ensure that in addition to spreading awareness on the importance of Grama Sabha, it should also throw light on legal awareness to educate people on the administration of panchayats. The Grama Sabhas should focus on spreading awareness on acts and other information – Forest Rights Act, MGNREGA, Panchayat Raj Act, etc., that have lineage with good governance and effective panchayats.

Grama Sabhas should be endowed with some executive powers to give approval for the development plans prepared by the village panchayats. The body should be entrusted with regulatory powers to exercise control and maintain natural resources like land, water, minor forest produce and it should be taken into confidence while initiating any exchange or dealings (*Subha. K and Bhargava B.S., 2002*). Similarly, common property resources like tanks, ponds, wells, minor mines should be brought under the purview of the Grama Sabha.

### **Some recommendations from the grassroots:**

1. The institution of the Grama Sabha/Ward Sabha need to be strengthened to enable people's role in planning policies and development projects, and evaluate the performance of elected and Government functionaries.
2. Evolve new strategies to ensure active participation of the community. Media – print and visual media could be utilized effectively to impart awareness on the importance of Grama Sabhas and its role in enabling good governance and decentralization.
3. Ensuring transparency and accountability in conducting Grama Sabhas shall enable deepening democracy.
4. The participation and representation of department officials and Grama Panchayat members should be made mandatory so as to enable the discussions to pave way for decisions and prioritization of developmental activities.
5. Conducting Children's Grama Sabha (Makkala Grama Sabha) and Mahila Grama Sabha should be made mandatory prior to the conduct of Grama Sabhas. This will ensure the best interests of the children and women.
6. In order to enable Grama Sabhas to be effective, planning should be undertaken through 'bottom-up approach'. The decisions of Grama Sabhas should be deemed final.

7. The Government initiative to video record the proceedings of Grama Sabha has been commendable. Though the order was passed in 2013, it is yet to see the light as most of the Grama Sabhas are not video recorded. This should be made mandatory.
8. The Government should also make concerted efforts to ensure social audit takes place mandatorily. Such social audits shall enable the panchayats to keep proper records of their resources and expenses, the grants received so that it will bring in transparency and accountability.
9. On the lines of SUGRAMAA, a collective participation of villages with the elected representatives shall make way for discussions and resolving of issues of the Grama Panchayat. Thus, Grama Panchayat and Grama Sabha should go hand in hand in ensuring 'betterment of the society'.
10. Extensive usage of print and electronic media shall ensure in providing awareness on Grama Sabha.

Grama Sabha should be made a corner stone of entire scheme of decentralized governance, planning and development by way of awarding independence in managing, protecting and preserving natural resources and formulation of socio-economic development programmes, projects and schemes for tribal people. Media plays a pivotal role in passing out information to the public/community. The insufficient information has been deterrent to the community to access government schemes. Hence, the role of media in strengthening democracy needs to be looked at. (*Raghabendra Chattopadhyay, 2011*).

### **Conclusion:**

The Grama Sabha is the cornerstone of the entire scheme of democratic decentralization in India initiated through the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution. Hence, the success or failure of the Panchayati Raj system largely depends on how powerful and effective the Grama Sabha is at the decentralized level to fulfil the desires and inspirations of the people. Recognizing the critical role of the Grama Sabha in village economy Gandhiji had said that true democracy could not be worked by some persons sitting at the top. It had to be worked from below by the people of every village.

A vibrant Grama Sabha is essential for the effective functioning of Village Panchayats by promoting transparency and accountability in administration, enhancing public participation in the planning and implementation of schemes and in the choice of beneficiaries, and paving the way for social audit. Though efforts are being held to ensure effective functioning of Grama Sabhas through video recording of Grama Sabhas, there has not been a major success in promoting good governance and decentralization in local self-government. Deepening democracy and inclusive growth should go hand-in-hand for effective development.

By strengthening the institution of Grama Sabha we can bring the gains of our democracy and economic prosperity spreads evenly across the country. As observed by Jay Prakash Narain "To me Grama Sabha signified village democracy. Let us not have only representative government from the village up to Delhi. In one place, at least let there be direct government, direct democracy. The relationship between Panchayat and Grama Sabha should be that of Cabinet and Assembly".

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