

Functioning of Gram Sabha in Panchayat Raj System in Tripura: A Study

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ABSTRACT

The concept of decentralisation and local governance are recognised as an essential element for the development of grass roots democracy. It is a process through which people can effectively participate in the affairs of the local governance. Any development plan and activity can be successful only with the active involvement of the people and this is possible if political power gets decentralised. In this context, Indian states have introduced the concept of democratic decentralised in the form of Panchayati Raj, Municipalities etc., At the rural level the concept of democratic decentralisation is materialised through the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The passing of Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act 1992 was a landmark development in the history of Panchayati Raj Institution as it provides for the institution of Gram Sabha. It is body through which all the development activities at the rural level are done with the active involvement of the people. Though GS is in existence in India for more than two decades but it is yet to emerge as an effective institution at the local level. It is in this context present study made an attempt to explore the functioning of Gram Sabha in Tripura and also to find out the involvement of political party in the functioning of GS. For conducting the study two districts were selected on the basis of Simple Random Sampling. From these two districts five development blocks were selected and from these selected blocks total 83 GPs were selected by using same method. Finally from these selected GPs total 415 respondents were interviewed. The study observes that in Tripura GS performs its functions effectively. It is much efficient in addressing the problems pertaining to the GP. But the study also observes that there is a huge party involvement in the selection of beneficiaries and making the agendas of the meeting of GS. To sum up it can be said that GS in Tripura is functioning as an effective institution of people's forum for the development rural areas as it provides the people including women and other marginalised sections with ample of opportunities to enhance their cooperation in the process of village governance.

Key words: Panchayat Raj, Gram Sabha, People's participation

The concept of decentralisation and local governance are recognised as an essential element for the development of grass roots democracy. It is a process through which responsibility of the decision making at the local level comes to the people. It brings the government closer to the people and compels it to act according to the expectation of the people. It also equally extends the opportunities for the people including marginalised section to participate actively in the functioning of the local governance. The real intention of participation is to strengthen human capabilities as well as encourage people to be capable of identifying and dealing with their problems promptly and accept all challenges that appear in the sphere of life. It develops independent and cooperative spirit among people. Any development plan and activity can be successful only with the active involvement of the people and this is possible if political power gets decentralised. In this context, Indian states have introduced the concept of democratic decentralised in the form of Panchayati Raj, Municipalities etc., where all the people including the poor and marginalised section can actively get involved in the decision making process.¹

The concept of democratic decentralisation is materialised at the rural level through the Panchayati Raj Institutions. It is considered as an effective institution for the socio-economic development of the rural people irrespective of caste, class, religion etc. It provides opportunity to people to participate in all the affairs of the rural governance and also empowers them to monitor the implementation of various development schemes at their locality. It is only through this institution that the people at the village level can be well aware about their rights and duties towards the society. It is well accepted that the success of Panchayati Raj Institutions depend not only on development of the villages, but also on increasing people's participation in planning and development activities. The passing of Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act 1992 was a landmark development in the history of Panchayati Raj Institution. It provides for the institution of Gram Sabha for ensuring effective participation of the people in the decision-making process at the rural level. As an organised body it has the duty to formulate various proposals and development programmes to be executed in the village areas. It has also the responsibility to identify the beneficiaries under various government projects and at the same time monitor the working of the village panchayat and implementation of various development projects in the locality.

¹ B.B.Lama. "Participatory Democracy and Panchayats in India - Problems and Prospects".In *Decentralizing Rural Governance and Development*, by A. K. Jana, 134. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2005.

Gram Sabha is a smallest organ in the three tier structure of Panchayati Raj Institution in India. It is recognised as a body that provide the people with opportunity to involve in planning and implementation of all the development activities in the locality. It serves as a platform through which all the marginalised section of the people like SCs, STs and women can get chance to participate directly in the process of rural governance. It is only through this body that elected members of the Gram Panchayats as well as the government officials are accountable to the people for their acts. It came into existence across the states in India following the provisions of the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act.

Though after the enactment of the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act Gram Sabha is in existence in India for more than two decades but it is yet to emerge as an effective institution as to meet the expectations of the people in the rural areas. It is unable to build up the confidence among the rural masses towards the functioning of grass roots democracy at rural level. Keeping this in mind the present study is undertaken to explore the functioning of Gram Sabha in the Panchayat Raj system in the state of Tripura which had immediately enacted its Panchayat Raj Act (Tripura Panchayat Raj Act 1993) under the provision of Seventy Third Amendment Act and provided for the institution Gram Sabha.

However, before going into the detail study of the functioning of Gram Sabha in Panchayat Raj system in Tripura it is pertinent to make a brief highlight about the composition and functions of Gram Sabha that are prescribed under the Tripura Panchayat Raj Act 1993.

*Under the provision of **the Tripura Panchayat Raj Act 1993** it is mentioned that the Gram Sabha is a body that consists of all the people those who have attained the age of eighteen (18) years and their name is registered in the electoral roll of a village that fall under the jurisdiction of a particular GP. The Act also mentioned about the organisation of Gram Sanad (Ward Sabha) in each and every village of the GP in Tripura. Gram Sanad is held in each ward of the GP. Under the provision of the Act the meeting of Gram Sabha as well as Gram Sanad are convened under the responsibility of the Pradhan (President). But in case the Pradhan remains absent then it is the Upa-Pradhan (Vice President) who is empowered to convene such meetings with the prior approval of GP. Moreover, the Act specifies certain functions for the GS such as preparation of budget about the activities of GPs for financial year; envisage annual accounts of the Gram Panchayat as well as audit report of last financial years; preparation of detail report about various development programmes of the GPs that are to be adopted in the current financial year. Besides, the Act prescribed certain*

functions for the Gram Sanad, viz., selection of beneficiaries for various development schemes, selection of place where development works are suppose to be implemented etc.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the present study is to explore functioning of Gram Sabha as an institution of people forum in the panchayat raj system in Tripura and also to examine the involvement of the political party in the functioning of Gram Sabha in Tripura.

Methods of the study

The present study is confined to the state of Tripura. For the purpose of the study at first two districts are selected i.e., North Tripura and West Tripura on the basis of Simple Random Sampling (SRS). From these sampled districts fifty (50%) percent development blocks that fall under Tripura Panchayat Act 1993 are selected further by using the method of SRS. Thus from North Tripura out of four (4) development block two (2) development blocks namely Kadamtala and Kalachera are selected randomly. Similarly from West Tripura out of five (5) development blocks three (3) development blocks namely Dukli, Jirania and Old Agartala are selected randomly. Then from the sampled districts a total of eighty three (83) Gram Panchayats (GPs) i.e., thirty six (36) GPs from North Tripura and forty seven (47) Gram Panchayats (GPs) from West Tripura are selected through Simple Random Sampling. Finally from each sampledGPs five Gram Sabha (GS) members are selected as respondents. Thus all together 415 respondents are interviewed. In addition, elected representatives of each selected Gram Panchayat are also interacted to understand the functioning of the Gram Sabhas. In order to obtain the data interview schedules were prepared and accordingly data were acquired. Furthermore, a number of Gram Sabha meetings were attended in order to understand the ground realities.

Data Analysis and interpretation

So, it is in this pretext the present study is undertaken to explore the working of Gram Sabha in the development of village panchayats as an effective institution of people forum in the state of Tripura with the help of following tables.

Table 1: Participation of the people at the GS meeting in Tripura

Respo- ndents	Tripura			
	Views of GS members			
	<i>Opinion of the members of GS</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	
<i>Male</i>	208 (50.1)	41 (9.9)	0	249 (60.0)
<i>Female</i>	92 (22.2)	39 (9.4)	35 (8.4)	166 (40.0)
Total	300 (72.3)	80 (19.3)	35 (8.4)	415 (100%)

Source: Field work

The above table reveals that in Tripura 72.3 per cent of the people participate in the meeting of GS. The reason for participation of a good number of people lies in the fact that the GS meetings are held on a regular basis as per the provisions of the Act. It is observed that in Tripura GS is very much active in addressing the problems of GP and simultaneously it makes constant vigil over the working of GPs in implementing various development projects in their locality.

Table 2: Holding of GS meeting in Tripura

GS Meeting	Tripura		
	Respondents (GS members)		Total
	M	F	
<i>Once in a month</i>	14 (3.4)	9 (2.3)	23 (5.5)
<i>Once in three month</i>	63 (15.2)	34 (8.2)	97 (23.4)
<i>Once in six month</i>	113 (27.2)	56 (13.5)	169 (40.7)
<i>Once in a year</i>	31 (7.5)	15 (3.6)	46 (11.1)
<i>Thrice in a Year</i>	0	0	0
<i>Whenever required</i>	7 (1.7)	9 (2.2)	16 (3.8)
<i>Don't know</i>	21 (5.1)	43 (10.4)	64 (15.4)
Total Respondents	249 (60.0)	166 (40.0)	415 (100%)

Regarding the frequency of holding the meeting of GS in Tripura 40.7 per cent of the respondent stated that such meetings are held once in a six month, followed by 23.4 per cent respondents who confirmed that the meetings of GS are held once in a three month. During the conversation with members of GS it is further reported that the GS meetings are regularly held and they get timely information about the holding of the meetings.

Table 3: subjects covered at the meeting of GS

	Issues discussed														
	Selection of beneficiaries for govt. schemes		Reviewing activities of GP		Scrutinize annual accounts & audit report		Endor sing village plan	Taxation matters		Make plan for Development work		Utilization certificate		Total	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Tripura															
Male	247 (59.5)	0 (0.00)	243 (58.5)	6 (1.4)	204 (49.1)	45 (10.8)	219 (52.7)	29 (6.9)	69 (16.6)	179 (43.1)	245 (59.0)	13 (3.1)	145 (34.9)	102 (24.5)	247 (59.5)
Female	164 (39.5)	3 (1.2)	157 (37.8)	9 (2.2)	125 (30.1)	41 (9.8)	119 (28.6)	40 (9.6)	29 (6.9)	140 (33.7)	157 (37.8)	0	88 (21.3)	80 (19.3)	168 (40.5)
Total	411 (99.0)	4 (1.0)	400 (96.4)	15 (3.6)	329 (79.2)	86 (20.7)	338 (81.4)	69 (16.6)	98 (23.6)	319 (76.8)	402 (96.8)	13 (3.1)	233 (56.1)	182 (43.8)	415 (100.0)

Source: Field work

The above table shows the issues that are covered in the meeting of GS in Tripura. It can be seen that 99 per cent of the respondents reported that selection of beneficiaries for various government sponsored schemes are taken up in the meeting of GS, which is followed by planning for development work (96.8 per cent), reviewing the activities of GP (96.4 per cent), scrutinizing annual accounts and audit report (79.2 per cent), providing utilization certificate for various government projects (56.1 per cent). It is thus evident that the GS meetings give equal weightage to all the important issues pertaining to the welfare of the citizens of the locality as well as the working of GP.

Table 4: Provision of conducting Ward Sabha

Respon- dents	Tripura			
	Ward Sabhas before GS Meeting			Total
	Yes	No	Don't know	
Male	247 (59.5)	0	0	247 (59.5)
Female	116 (28)	4 (1.0)	48 (11.5)	168 (40.5)
Total	363 (87.4)	4 (1.0)	30 (11.5)	415(100%)

Source: Field work

One of the good practices in the rural governance in Tripura is the holding of Ward Sabhas before the GS meetings and this is being confirmed by the majority of the respondents (87.4 per cent). It is reported that matters such as selecting the list beneficiaries, development plans, implementation of development schemes etc., are at length discussed in Ward Sabhas and then these are placed to GS for further discussion and confirmation. Such kind of practice brings in transparency in the process of rural governance.

Table 5: Methods followed in recording the proceeding of GS meeting

Respondents	Resolution recorded				
	Recorded in a Register	Written in a page	Not recorded	Don't know	Total
Tripura					
Male	243 (58.5)	0	0	6 (1.4)	249 (60)
Female	108 (26.0)	0	0	57 (14.0)	166 (40)
Total	351 (84.5)	0	0	64 (15.5)	415(100%)

Source: Field work

On the subject of procedure of recording the resolution of GS meeting it is noticed from above table that 84.5 of the respondents stated that register is generally used to record the proceedings of the meeting of GS, while 15.5 per cent of the respondents are not aware about the procedure. It is also reported that the decisions that are adopted in the meeting of GS are immediately recorded in the register in the presence of all the members GS. So, there remain hardly any chances of manipulating the decisions taken in such meeting.

Table 6: Extent of expressing opinions by the people in the meeting of GS

Respondents (GS members)	Tripura			Total
	Express of opinion by the people in GS meeting			
	Yes	No	No response	
<i>Male</i>	208 (50.1)	41 (9.9)	0	249 (60.0)
<i>Female</i>	92 (22.2)	39 (9.4)	35 (8.4)	166 (40.0)
Total	300 (72.3)	80 (19.3)	35 (8.4)	415 (100%)

Source: Field work

On the issue of expressing the opinion in the meeting of GS, 72.3 per cent of the respondents stated that they can freely express their opinion in the GS meeting. On the contrary only 19.3 per cent of the respondents stated in negative. It is observed in the course of the study that GS members are quite independent in putting their demands and sharing their problems in the meeting of GS.

Table 7: Process followed in adopting resolution in the GS meeting

Respondents	Tripura			
	Decisions in the GS taken unanimously			Total
	Yes	No	No response	
Male	216 (52.0)	33 (7.9)	0	249 (60.0)
Female	98 (23.6)	42 (10.1)	26 (6.3)	166 (40.0)
Total	314 (75.5)	75 (18.0)	26 (6.3)	415 (100%)

Source: Field work

As regards the process of adopting resolutions in the GS meetings a significant number of respondents (75.5 per cent) opined that decisions in such meeting are adopted unanimously after duly considering each and every opinion of the members of GS. While only 18 per cent of the respondents stated in the negative. It is very important to observe that in the meeting of GS views of every member are taken into consideration and as a result this body is quite successful in meeting the demands of the people.

Table 8: Extent of executing the resolution taken in the meeting of GS

Respondents	Tripura			
	Implementation of the decisions adopted in the GS meeting			Total
	Yes	No	No response	
Male	187 (45.1)	38 (9.1)	24 (5.8)	249 (60.0)
Female	88 (21.2)	35 (8.4)	43 (10.4)	166 (40.0)
Total	275 (66.3)	73 (17.6)	67 (16.1)	415 (100%)

Source: Field work

Regarding the status of implementation of the decisions taken in the meeting of GS it is revealed in the above table that 66.3 per cent of the respondents reported positively i.e., the decisions that are adopted in the meetings are implemented at the village level. On the other hand, only 17.6 per cent of the respondents viewed in negative. It is also found that there is a

provision for the constitution of executive committee to monitor the implementation of development works in the local areas. It deserves mentions here that for the success of grassroots democracy implementation of the schemes/projects are essential component and in Tripura this aspect is rightly monitored and administered by the local bodies.

Involvement of party interference in the function of GS

Respon- dents	Tripura			Total
	Involvement of party interference in GS			
	Yes	No	Don't know	
Male	177 (42.6)	72 (17.3)	0	249 (60.0)
Female	117 (28.2)	21 (5.1)	28 (7.0)	166 (40.0)
Total	294 (70.8)	93 (22.4)	28 (7.0)	415 (100%)

Source: Field work

Regarding the involvement of political party in the functioning of GS it is revealed from the above table that 70.8 per cent of the respondents opined that party interference is there in the functioning of GS, whereas 22.4 per cent of the respondents viewed in negative. It is further observed during the conversation with the member of GS that in Tripura there is huge party involvement in the selection of beneficiaries under various government schemes. The person those who are affiliated with ruling party (CPIM) get maximum benefits of the schemes. Moreover, all the agendas of the meeting of GS, preparation of annual budget, formulation of development plans etc are taken on the basis of the opinion of the leaders of the ruling party (CPIM).

Findings and Conclusion

An analysis of the available data evinces that in Tripura meetings of Gram Sabha are held regularly as per the norms laid down in the Tripura Panchayat Act 1993. People are also kept informed about the holding of the meeting from time to time. This generates enthusiasm among the people to attend the meeting of GS. It is noticed during the course of investigation that the GS is much efficient in addressing the problems pertaining to the GP and at the same time it keeps constant vigil over the functioning of GPs in implementing various government projects in the locality through the constitution of executive committee. The members of this committee are selected by the members of GS itself. Apart from this in Tripura GP regularly conducts various training programmes especially for the members of GS regarding the functioning of GPs as well as GS. This kind of initiative boosts up the confidence of the member of GS and as a result they always remain conscious about the functioning GPs towards the development of locality.

It is most important to note that in Tripura there is a provision for conducting the meeting of Ward Sabha in each ward of the GP before conducting the meeting of GS. In such meeting all the important issues such as selection of the list beneficiaries for various government schemes, implementation of development projects, development plans etc. are discussed and resolved and these are sent to the GS for further confirmation. This kind of practice brings in transparency in the process of rural governance as problems of each ward are taken into account. Another important fact that provides transparency in the functioning of GS is that all the proceedings that are adopted during the course of meeting of GS are immediately recorded into the register in the presence of all the members of the GS. Thus, there remain hardly any chances for manipulating the decisions adopted in the meetings. Further, it is also observed during the course of study that members of GS are quite independent in putting their demands and sharing their problems in the meetings. GS is found as an active body in executing the resolution adopted in the meeting. This signifies the effectiveness of GS in addressing the problems of the people.

However, it is observed during the course of study that there is huge party preference in the selection of beneficiaries for various government sponsored schemes. The cadres and supporters of the ruling party [at the time of the study CPI (M) was ruling the state] get most of the benefits of the schemes. It is also found that the ruling party gets involved in preparing all the agenda of the meetings of GS, making the budget, formulation of development plans etc.

To sum up it can be said that GS is functioning as an effective institution of people's forum for the development of villages in Tripura as it provides the people including women and other marginalised sections with ample of opportunities to enhance their cooperation in the process of village governance. Moreover, the practice of transparency in carrying out functioning of rural governance, provision of the constitution Ward Sabha, existence of executive committee to monitor the implementation of development programmes made GS a vibrant institution at the rural level. Though there are certain problems existed regarding the functioning of GS i.e., existence of party preference in the selection of beneficiaries, party involvement in preparing the agenda of GS but it is expected that with the change of government in Tripura (2018) there will be some positive changes in the functioning of GS, which will certainly help in mitigating the problems of the institute.

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