

Role of Women in Gramasabha for Inclusive Local Planning

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Abstract The decentralised planning conceived the concept of *Gramasabha* with a mission of ensuring people's participation in local planning and in decision making and thereby empowering all weaker sections especially women in multiple dimensions. This paper is an attempt to assess her role as decision maker in GS, and identify those impediments in her participation as well as decision making. This micro level study based on a primary survey examined the problems and prospects of *Gramasabha* in recognizing women as decision makers. This paper reveals the problems observed by the researcher in the conduct of GS.

Index Terms Gramasabha, decentralised planning, decision making, people's participation

INTRODUCTION

The decentralised planning during the mid-nineties, has given greater visibility to gender issues, first time, in the history of Kerala. This novel planning process conceived *Gramasabha* (GS) with the mission of ensuring the participation of all sections of people including women in local planning, thus leading to their empowerment. Although these strategies open up new avenues for progressing the status of women, their involvement as key agents in development is still neglected. Contrary to other states in India, the attendance in GS meetings in Kerala is dominated by women. The state level data show that GS is mostly attended by women. Unfortunately, the strategic needs of women are not being addressed effectively and the noble vision of decentralised planning was not taken into account. Why local governance rooted in GS fails to address its strategic needs? Indeed, the much glorified straight forward relation between literacy and women's autonomy is to be questioned. This micro level study analyses the feasibility of GS in generating a favourable environment for women to speak out. The present study conducted in the selected local bodies of Thrissur district is an inquiry to assess her participation in GS and identify those impediments in participation and in decision making. Her gendered roles and household responsibilities were the most serious factors limiting her participation in grassroots institutions of planning.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Decentralized planning makes local government closer to the people and enhances people's participation. It is said that in no other planning, other than decentralized planning, women and the excluded communities make gains (Kumari, 2006). During the third year of decentralized planning, (in 1999), women participation increased steeply from 23 per cent to 44 per cent and that of males decreased to 59.13 per cent from 76.54 per cent. In a comparative study between states in India, women exceeded men in GS participation, in Kerala, compared to other states (Narayana, 2007). The average participation in GS for beneficiary schemes was higher. So, purpose is an important determinant of GS participation (Government of Kerala, 2009). There exists a correlation between the political association of the GPs and their efficacy in mobilizing people to participate in local level planning. GS is the forum for expressing 'practical gender needs' rather than 'strategic gender needs' (Seema & Mukherjee, 2000). Kudumbashree had motivated women to participate in grassroots level institutions of planning leading to a noticeable increase in their participation in GS.

The major objective of this paper is to assess her role in *Gramasabha* and identify the factors which hinder her participation.

METHODOLOGY

There are 88 local bodies in Thrissur district of Kerala. In total, 6 panchayats were selected which constitute 7 per cent of the local bodies in the district. The women participants in the GS were the respondents of the survey. Two wards were selected at random from each local body and 50 women participants from two wards in a local body were randomly selected. Thus 300 respondents were surveyed using well-structured questionnaires. The researcher attended at least one GS in each of the selected wards and observed the way it had functioned.

GRAMASABHA (GS)

GS means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a ward within the area of panchayat. According to Article 243A, GS at the ward level, may exercise powers and perform functions similar to legislature of a state may by law provide. GS is a deliberate constitutional body at the village level. In the GS, people get an ideal platform to present their needs and local problems.

The primary functions of GS are to identify the needs of the ward and assign priorities, select beneficiaries and locations of the project and review the programmes or work done. According to the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act (KPR) 1994, GS shall meet at least once in three months at a place accessible to the people. It is mandated that the quorum of participants in GS be not less than 10 per cent of voters. GS is a platform opened to the public to formulate plans and prioritise schemes at the ward level. In the GS scheduled for beneficiary selection, it has to prepare the list of beneficiaries and announce the names of beneficiaries in the same GS. No authority has the right to make any changes to the list. If any change is to be done, the approval of GS is to be. It also prioritises the list of beneficiaries at the ward level. No project or plan can be implemented without documenting the approval from GS. *Grama Sabha* is responsible for preparing the priority list of beneficiaries and if any revision is required, the local body has to reconvene the GS to obtain formal approval. As such, the *Gramasabha* has the potential to emerge as a vital platform for expressing people's needs and aspirations.

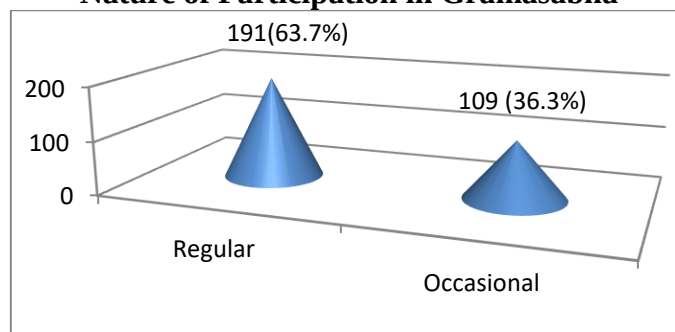
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gramasabha has the potential to emerge as a platform for expressing people's needs and aspirations. This will help effective utilisation of the local resources and pave the way for need-based development which would bring visible benefit to the local community. In the present study, participatory empowerment is analysed based on the physical and substantive participation.

The study analysed panchayat-wise data on participation in GS. It is mandated that at least 10 per cent of voters should participate in the GS and if the quorum is not satisfied, another GS is to be convened again. To avoid the inconvenience of a second GS, there would be false entry of voters. Hence reliability of the data on participation level is often questioned.

One notable issue was the lack of updated data. The data in the case of Engandiyoor had contradictions. Mattathoor and Engandiyoor just repeated the data of the previous year. While analysing the secondary data, the researcher confronted the problem of poor documentation of GS minutes book. The date, agenda, decisions taken at the GS and data on participants were not properly documented in the minute books of GSs. The data on physical and substantive participation were collected through primary survey. *Physical participation* was analysed in terms of regularity and punctuality of participation. While analyzing physical participation level, participants had been divided into two ie., regular participants and occasional participants. Nearly 64 per cent of them were regular participants and 36.3 per cent did not attend the GS regularly (Figure 1).

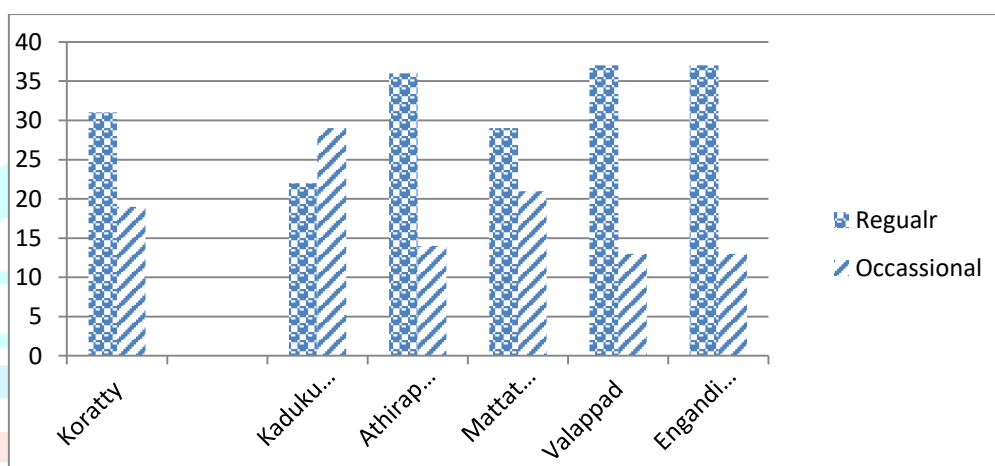
Figure 1
Nature of Participation in Gramasabha



While probing about panchayat-wise women participation in GS, women in coastal areas (Valappad and Engandiyoor) were more regular and punctual in participation (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Panchayat-wise Distribution of Participation in Gramasabha



The substantive participation was examined whether they were active, responsive and interactive while attending GS meeting. women exhibited leadership skills and powers to raise needs while participating in GS.

Substantive participation was absent in the case of 53 per cent of women participants who were passive in GS and they just observed the process, hardly made any comments, did not participate in group discussions and never raised a need in GS. The survey found that 47 per cent were active participants who had participated in the group discussions, raised the need for a common cause, and addressed the public for getting attention (Table 1)

Table 1
Level of Participation in Gramasabha

Level of participation	No. of respondents	Per cent
Active	149	47
Passive	159	53
Total	300	100

More than three fourth of them revealed that on many occasions, they had raised needs and this definitely helped to cultivate a sort of assertive power in them. The majority of women respondents agreed that active discussions in GS built confidence among them. They admitted that if they had been sitting at home during the time of GS, they would not have had opportunity to get acquaint with the ongoing schemes of panchayat and different development programmes. GS was the first largest platform in their life for articulating their needs.

Table 2
Participation in Raising Common Issues

Response	No. of the Respondents	Per cent
Greatly Improved	166	55.3
Fairly Improved	54	18.0
No Improvement	80	26.7
Total	300	100

More than half of them (55 per cent) admitted that their ability to raise common issues before the public had improved considerably (Table 2). They opined that they did not have any sort of problems as women participants and were confident enough to raise their needs before a forum. However, one fourth of them admitted that they had not felt any sort of gains out of these activities.

REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING GRAMASABHA

This section analyses the reasons reported by the women for the inconsistent participation in *Gramasabha* (Table 3). Around 45 per cent reported that they did not have time to spend for GS due to burdensome household responsibilities. Her gendered roles and household duties often restricted timely and full-fledged participation in GS. A considerable number of them (43.1 per cent) cited various reasons for their frequent absence from the GS. They strongly believed that a woman's participation was no longer required if her husband or sibling was attending it. Many of them attended GS as participation was mandatory for applying for beneficiary schemes. A few of them (5.5 per cent) had a strong conviction that only socially disadvantaged people were needed to attend GS.

Table 3
Reasons for Regular Absence in Gramasabha

Reasons	No. of Respondents	Per cent
Not interested	6	5.5
Preference to weaker classes	6	5.5
Family duties	50	45.9
Other reasons	47	43.1
Total no of inconsistent participants	109	100

In brief, her gendered roles and household responsibilities were the most serious factors restraining her from participation in local planning. Here her participatory role is determined by men in the society. Despite the high levels in literacy, education and better social indicators, women in Kerala remain largely absent from mainstream political structures at both grassroots and higher levels in Kerala.

PARTICIPATION LEVEL AND BENEFICIARY SCHEME AVAILED

The hypothesis of a relationship between the motivation of the women to participate in GS and the incidence of being selected as beneficiaries is examined here. Out of those who have availed of beneficiary schemes, 72.3 per cent were regular participants. Since the calculated Chi square value 19.189 is greater than the critical value, the relationship between the likelihood of receiving beneficiary schemes and the motivation to attend GS is highly significant. It implies that those who have availed of beneficiary schemes are highly motivated to attend GS (Table 4).

Table 4.
Association between Participation Level and Beneficiary Schemes Aailed

Caste	Beneficiaries	Non-Beneficiaries	Total
Regular	146 (72.3)	45(45.9)	191(63.7)
Occasional	56(27.7)	53(54.1)	109(36.3)
Total	202	98	300(100)
df =1		A =0.05	$\chi^2 = 3.841$

SELF-HELP GROUPS AND GRAMASABHA

Self-help groups play a vital role in the empowerment of women. The major self-help group exclusively of women and for women is *Kudumbasree*. It is a state sponsored poverty alleviation programme focusing primarily on micro finance and micro-enterprise development. At the bottom of *Kudumbashree*, there are Neighborhood Groups (NHGs) comprising 10-20 women members. A greater proportion of women participants (80 per cent) were members of *Kudumbashree*. Among the member respondents, three fourth of them regularly participated in *Kudumbashree*. There was a weekly meeting in every *Kudumbashree*. Any discussion in Neighborhood Groups prior to the GS meeting was beneficial for effective participation in GS. This discussion could make the GS more participatory and more enlightening. Nearly 41 per cent of the participants agreed that discussions were held in their respective NHGs prior to the GS.

PROBLEMS IN THE CONDUCT OF GRAMASABHA

This section analyses how GS, the basic pillar of local governance swerves from its noble mission of grassroots level democracy. The distinguished feature of GS in Kerala is the dominant participation of women." What are the problems in the functioning of GS and why GS cannot take active participation in the development process of a panchyat are analysed here.

Most of the participants did not have proper awareness about the purpose and powers of GS. A large proportion believed that GS was a platform for distributing beneficiary schemes to the needy and for this participation in GS was compulsory. A considerable proportion believed that participation was required if and only if the husband/sibling was absent.

According to Panchayatiraj Act 1994, at least 10 per cent of voters should participate in the GS and if the quorum is not satisfied, another GS is to be convened again. In order to avoid the inconvenience of second GS, the authorities just entered the names of voters to reach the minimum 10 per cent level. This fudging of figures will definitely affect the decision making powers of the GS and distort the objectives of decentralized planning.

The procedure of conducting GS was not as per the rules in Kerala Panchayatiraj Act 1994. Before the GS, the working group will be convened and discuss the needs and priorities. The participants in the GS are supposed to divide into various groups and discuss assigned subjects. After the discussion, each group has to make recommendations on the plan proposal. At the end of the meeting, the final decision will be announced. In actual practice, the process was in the reversing order. No group discussions were found in any GS surveyed. GS merely served as a platform for delivering basic information about ongoing programmes and circulating beneficiary application forms. The final decision about the allocation of resources and the list of beneficiaries would be drafted in the local body office.

The basic problem of GS in Kerala noted by all the scholars is that the participation level of upper caste or high income families is very insignificant due to their strong conviction that GS is a platform meant for distributing benefits to the families belonging to the economically and socially weaker sections. This perception limited the 'active' participation, particularly among women from economically and socially advantaged classes whose understanding of local government institutions is alarmingly low

CONCLUSION

Why a system rooted in *Gramasabha* fails to bring up women in the limelight and is unable to address their adverse conditions? The present study is an inquiry to assess her role as decision maker in *Gramasabha* and identify the impediments in participation and decision making. *Gramasabha* gives greater opportunities to women for improving capabilities like participation in a public forum, decision making power with regard to resource utilisation at the ward level and getting awareness about decentralized planning process. However, *Gramasabha* swerves from democratic planning and is devoid of inclusive participation of women. The hindering factors of participation were lack of awareness about GS and its functions, lack of information about current and forthcoming projects, and poor organisational capacities. GS was just a platform where people got orientation about ongoing plan and programmes and submitted beneficiary applications. It means that those who have availed of schemes were more enthusiastic about attending GS. The procedure of conducting GS was not as per the rules of Kerala Panchayatiraj Act 1994. The success of decentralized planning depends greatly on the proper functioning of GS which requires substantial participation of all sections of people irrespective of caste, sex and region. Effective participation is possible only if participants have awareness about purpose and powers of *Gramasabha* and local planning.

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