

Grama Sabha Scenario in Orissa and West Bengal

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Grama Sabha, the ideal of direct democracy, is an element of Grama Panchayat, the lowest tier of Panchayati Raj Institution. As each of the Indian state has legislated its own Panchayat Act attempting to incorporate the central theme of Constitutional Amendment, it is worthwhile to take glimpses of Grama Sabha of two neighbouring states, Orissa and West Bengal.

Provisions in Orissa

Orissa Grama Panchayat Act, 1964 amended from time to time provides the constitution of Grama as a village or a group of contiguous villages, assigning a name which shall be of one of the villages comprised within the Grama. A Grama Sasan is constituted for every Grama, composed of all persons registered by virtue of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 in so much of the electoral roll for any Assembly Constituency for the time being in force as relates to the Grama. The Grama Sasan is a body corporate having perpetual succession and common seal, with power to acquire, hold and dispose of property and to contract and may by the said name be sued. The chairperson of the Grama Panchayat is designated as Sarapancha and is directly elected.

Grama Sabha of Orissa (As depicted in Orissa Grama Panchayat Act)

Grama Sabha is the general body meeting of the Grama Sasan composed of members as

per the electoral roll in respect of the Grama. But Grama Panchayat is constituted for every Grama Sasan as the executive body of the latter.

There is provision for at least two meetings of the Grama Sasan in a year called Grama Sabha, one in February and the other in June. The quorum of the Grama Sabha is fixed as one tenth of the members of the Grama Sasan. In the event of there being no quorum, the Grama Sabha shall stand adjourned to a future day for which notice will be given in a prescribed manner and no quorum is necessary for the meeting on new date.

The duty of the Grama Sabha is to consider

- (a) At the February Grama Sabha each year, the programmes and works to be undertaken by the Grama Panchayat for the ensuing year and the annual budget for the Grama for that year having regard of the recommendations of the different Palli Sabhas within the Grama and give its recommendations to the Grama Panchayat.
- (b) At the Grama Sabha, held during the month of June each year, the report of the programmes and works undertaken by the Grama Panchayat and their progress during the preceding year along with the annual audit report are submitted by the Sarapanch.

(c) At any Grama Sabha, proposals for levy of taxes, rates, rents and fees and the enhancement of rates, organisation of community service, drawing up and implementation of agricultural production plans and any other matter as may be prescribed.

Orissa's Palli Sabha: A Lower Tier of Multi-Village Grama Sasans

Orissa Grama Panchayat Act, 1964 provides constitution of Palli Sabha where the area constitutes a Ward of the Grama i.e. when multiple contiguous villages constitute one Grama, the neighbouring villages will have Palli Sabha. Each Palli Sabha shall consist of all persons registered in the electoral roll for Assembly Constituency for the time being in force as it relates to the area in respect of the Palli Sabha.

Palli Sabha shall meet in February every year. The Ward Member of the Ward for which the Palli Sabha is constituted (if more than one such person, one from the list of all such persons in order of preference to be determined by the Grama Panchayat) shall preside over the Palli Sabha. In absence of such a person at the meeting at the appointed time the President may be elected from among the members.

The members present at any Palli Sabha will form the quorum of the meeting and the proceedings of the meeting shall be recorded and authenticated by its President. It is the duty of the Palli Sabha at its annual meeting in February each year to give its recommendations to the Grama Panchayat in respect of the matters like:

- (a) development works and programmes that may be taken up during the ensuing year.
- (b) annual budget estimate submitted by the Grama Panchayat.

Provisions in West Bengal

Each Gram Panchayat comprises a number of villages and is divided into mouzas.

The election of Pradhan, Upa-Pradhan and Members is conducted as per the provisions of the West Bengal Panchayat Election Rules. The Chairperson of the Gram Panchayat is designated as Pradhan in West Bengal and is indirectly elected from among the Gram Panchayat Members.

West Bengal Model of Planning for Gram Panchayat:

The Gram Panchayats in West Bengal were vested with lot of powers and functions even prior to the amendments and therefore, the Panchayats in the post- amendment period can be considered as third generation Panchayats with adequate experience.

As the Gram Panchayats in the state are quite large in size having a population of twenty to thirty thousand, the Gram Panchayats have been sub- divided on ward basis amending the Gram Panchayat Act, and for each ward constitution of Gram Sansad has been made mandatory. Gram Sansad is a body constituted with all the voters in a constituency of the Gram Panchayat. These are the lowest level units where the participatory planning exercise for Gram Panchayat is envisaged.

Gram Sabha Story of West Bengal

The Gram Sabha is the most powerful foundation of decentralized governance by ensuring elected representatives directly accountable to the people. The aim of the government has been to strengthen the Gram Sabha by introducing some favourable policy changes as the attendance in this ideal meeting of direct democracy is always low.

Some of the key features in relation to Gram Sabha are as follows:

- The quorum for a Gram Sabha meeting remains one tenth and it is essential to have one-third of the quorum of women members.
- The Gram Sabha can approve as well as audit expenditure up to three lakhs of rupees.

- The Panchayat Karmi (Panchayat Secretary appointed by the Panchayats but drawing salary from the State Government) can be removed from his/her post only if the Gram Sabha approves it.

- Each of the villages within one Gram Panchayat can have its own Gram Sabha.

- The Gram Sabha has the right to recall the Pradhan of the Gram Panchayat after two and a half years since the date of commencement of his/her tenure.

The key roles entrusted to the Gram Sabha are:

- Micro-planning,
- social audit of Panchayat functioning,
- ratification of Panchayat accounts,
- balance sheets,
- identification and approval of beneficiaries, and
- supervisory and regulatory functions.

Gram Sansad Constituted in Each Ward of GP (Village Constituency):

The Gram Sansad or the Village Constituency meetings are instruments of direct participation of the people in the planning process as well as monitoring elected representatives. Under the laws, the Gram Sansad is supposed to:

- guide and advise the Gram Panchayats (village councils) in regard to schemes for economic development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area;
- identify or lay down principles for identification of the beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation programmes;
- constitute beneficiary committees for ensuring active participation of the people in

implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits of schemes in the area;

- mobilise mass participation for community welfare, and programmes for adult education, family planning and child welfare; and

- record its objections to any action of the village council chief or any member of the village council for failure to implement development schemes properly or without active participation of the people of the area.

Panchayat Affairs in West Bengal:

The introduction of the institutions of the Gram Sabha (annual meeting of the voters) to review the proposed budget for the next year and the previous year's performance and the Gram Sansad (constituency level six-monthly meetings of the entire electorate of a constituency) to discuss local needs, new programmes, and choose beneficiaries of existing programmes, to review the past and proposed programmes, and inspect the accounts of expenditure and budgets in the Panchayat. Wards are social innovations after the Constitutional Amendment.

The Village Constituency meetings are thus an instrument of direct participation of the people in the planning process as well as monitoring elected representatives. Under the laws, the Gram Sansads are supposed to (i) guide and advise the Gram Panchayats (village councils) in regard to schemes for economic development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area; (ii) identify or lay down principles for identification of the beneficiaries for various poverty alleviation programmes; (iii) constitute beneficiary committees for ensuring active participation of the people in implementation, maintenance and equitable distribution of benefits of schemes in the area; (iv) mobilise mass participation for community welfare, and programmes for adult education,

family planning, and child welfare; and (v) record its objections to any action of the village council chief or any member of the village council for failure to implement development schemes properly or without active participation of the people of the area.

Ground Realities in Grama Sabha Functioning in Orissa and West Bengal :

The functioning of the Grama Sabha can be assessed from the following parameters:

- Participation and level of awareness of the Gram Sabha
- Issues of discussion and the process of decision-making
- Pattern of leadership
- Capacity of Gram Sabhas
- Transparency and accountability of the three tiers (GP, PS & ZP) to the Gram Sabha

The functioning of Grama Sabha and Palli Sabha / Gram Sansad in Orissa and West Bengal reveal a dismal figure of attendance, lack of leadership and decision, lack of vision and activity mostly due to want of attendance.

India is exemplary in its democratic trend despite its very strong history of aristocracy. Present democracy of India can be viewed as centrifugal trend as it had spread from Delhi to its periphery.

What is needed is demand based democracy, from periphery to centre, the centripetal way of democratic functioning. It is Gandhian oceanic circle of villages constituting India. We, the citizens have certain obligations of attending the Grama Sabha in large numbers spontaneously and fulfilling the democratic ideology. But surprisingly, this is vitally lacking everywhere.

Presently, the Grama Sabha strongly needs attendance of villagers, in the spirit of democracy, with all sections and cross-sections of villagers. Barring attendance, proxy management without quorum cannot manage the village affairs long. Each one of us must be motivated to glorify Indian democracy by paying due worth to Grama Sabha, at least by attending it.

One warning for apathetic in democracy is heard in Greece, where Pericles speech disclosed the vital element of democratic instinct, 'here (in Athens) each individual is interested not only in his own affairs, in the affairs of the State as well; even those who are mostly occupied with their own business, are extremely well informed on general politics.... This is peculiarity of ours, we don't say that man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business, and we say that he has no business here at all.

In context of Grama Sabha, it can be interpreted as, affair of Grama Sabha, as the affair of every citizen villager, each attendant can seek social justice and accountability, suggest plans and programmes of the Grama Panchayat. In case he abandons it, he has no voice, none of his allegations is going to be heard as regards to village politics and BPL selection and the likes. Rather, his choice of road, water, electricity will not be honoured.

References:

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