

People and Panchayat *Participation, Awareness and Perception*

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Abstract

Successful decentralisation is not just about building good political institutions, it is also essential to improve overall governance at the local level. This includes meaningful participation of the local population and their inclusion into decision-making processes to foster transparency, accountability and responsiveness, and to guarantee efficient and effective policy-implementation. Meaningful inclusion of all relevant actors at the local level is decisive for successful local development, to ensure that different local power structures work with each other (George Lutz & Wolf Linder, 2004:1). Theoretically, decentralised governance was expected to promote development when it presents necessary conditions. The present paper proposed to examine one important condition i.e., the dynamics of peoples' participation, awareness and perceptions.

This paper is an extract from a Ph. D Thesis titled **Decentralised Governance and Development in Manipur.**

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People and Panchayat

Participation, Awareness and Perception

Introduction

People's participation in this paper is seen as process variable to decentralised governance. Conceptually, the governing process can be seen as the product or an outcome of the interactive process among the people, elected members and officials. The nature of the outcome, can be reasonably assumed, depends on the quality of such interactive process, which in turn depends on the level of awareness and perception of these actors about these institutions. It may be recalled that participation is also measured through the perception of individuals. Perception in this context is measured in terms of score obtained by individuals on the scale used for the present study. The perception score depends on the nature of response (Yes=1/No=0) expressed by the respondents for the different statements given in the scale. Scale was developed for peoples' participation, awareness and perception by using different indicators as shown below:

Measuring Indicators of People's Participation, Awareness and Perception

| Variable | Indicators |
|----------------------|---|
| <i>Participation</i> | Voted in GP election, attended election meetings, participated in rallies, pasted wall posters, wrote graffiti, distributed hand bills, door-to-door campaign, attendance in Gram Sabha meetings, right to raise/ask question in GS meetings, selection of beneficiary in GS meetings, right to take part in formulation of plans in GS meetings, right to take part in decision-making in GS meetings, quality of social audit in GS meetings, attendance in GP meetings, right to raise/ask questions in GP meetings, right to form citizens' forum to communicate priorities and concerns in GP meeting, involvement in identification of needs, location and beneficiary, involvement in implementation of plans/Scheme, interaction with member/officials over the benefits, vocalization of needs |
| <i>Awareness</i> | <i>Awareness of and participation in Gram Panchayat Elections</i> (Knew when the last Gram Panchayat election held, Voted in the last Gram Panchayat election, Vouched fair conduct of election, Doesn't matter whether voted or not); <i>Remembering election campaigns</i> (Approached by candidates, any political leader campaigned, Received handbills); <i>Remembering election promises. Recalling names of elected panchayat representatives</i> (Deputy Pradhan, ward member, panchayat secretary, and Zilla Parishad president); <i>Knowledge of GP meetings</i> (Periodicity |

of meetings, what transpires in the meetings, Acknowledging GP's contribution in the area); *Confirming the next elections* (Next election due, Sure of next election being held on time, Disappointed if election not held on time, would like to contest). *Panchayat leaders contesting a second time* (Second time contestant, Winners rewarded for good work).

Perception

Desirability of the panchayat elections (Defeat corrupt sitting members/candidates, Reward deserving ones); *Contributions of the gram panchayat* (Water, School, Road, Streetlights, Hospitals, Toilets, Housing, Don't know); *Level of Satisfaction with Gram Panchayat*; *Attitude of panchayat members* (Friendly, Not friendly, No response)

Methodology

This is an empirical and analytical study based on both primary and secondary data. A combination of various research techniques was adopted in the present study. The methodology chosen followed a two-pronged strategy, including quantitative and qualitative approach. For the present study, Imphal East-I Community Development (C.D) Block (Sawombung) was selected randomly. Imphal East-I Community Development (C.D) Block, (Sawombung) consists of 25 Gram Panchayats with a population of 1, 13,508 (2001 census). Of these twenty-five Gram Panchayats (GPs), it was decided to select (through lots) four Gram Panchayats (GPs). The four randomly selected Gram Panchayats were: (1) Sawombung Gram Panchayat, (2) Laipham Khunnou Gram Panchayat, (3) Haraorou Tangkham, and (4) Tellou channa Seijang Gram Panchayat. In each Gram Panchayat, 60 (Sixty) respondents (households) were selected randomly. Thus, in each Gram Panchayat, 60 people were interviewed, covering a total of 240 people in the study. For the purpose of analysis, respondents were grouped on the basis of Social, Demographic and Economic Characteristics with a view to ascertain whether these socio-economic and demographic factors have had any relationship with the levels of awareness, perceptions and participation. The data relating to these levels are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Per cent distribution of respondents for Social, economic and demographic characteristics of respondents by People's participation

| Sl. No. | Socio economic and demographic characteristics | People's participation | | | | Chi square | p-value |
|------------|--|------------------------|--------|------|-------|------------|---------|
| | | Low | Medium | High | Total | | |
| Sex | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Male | 32.0 | 55.8 | 12.2 | 100.0 | 1.548 | 0.461 |
| 2 | Female | 27.9 | 50.0 | 22.1 | 100.0 | | |
| Marital status | | | | | | | |
| 1 | married | 29.5 | 56.0 | 14.5 | 100.0 | 7.814 | 0.020 |
| 2 | unmarried | 37.5 | 45.0 | 17.5 | 100.0 | | |
| Caste | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Upper | 32.3 | 49.0 | 18.8 | 100.0 | 13.926 | 0.030 |
| 2 | Backward | 31.1 | 54.4 | 14.4 | 100.0 | | |
| 3 | SC/ST | 37.5 | 55.0 | 7.5 | 100.0 | | |
| 4 | Others | | 85.7 | 14.3 | 100.0 | | |
| Age | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 18-29 | 32.4 | 61.8 | 5.9 | 100.0 | 19.299 | 0.013 |
| 2 | 30-45 | 32.9 | 52.4 | 14.6 | 100.0 | | |
| 3 | 46-55 | 28.6 | 48.6 | 22.9 | 100.0 | | |
| 4 | 56-65 | 8.3 | 75.0 | 16.7 | 100.0 | | |
| 5 | 65 plus | 46.7 | 46.7 | 6.7 | 100.0 | | |
| Education | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Illiterate | 36.6 | 48.8 | 14.6 | 100.0 | 17.615 | 0.007 |
| 2 | Primary | 31.8 | 55.7 | 12.5 | 100.0 | | |
| 3 | Secondary | 11.9 | 64.3 | 23.8 | 100.0 | | |
| 4 | Graduate | 39.3 | 50.0 | 10.7 | 100.0 | | |
| Occupation | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Agricultural labour | 19.1 | 58.8 | 22.1 | 100.0 | 27.361 | 0.001 |
| 2 | Cultivation | 44.2 | 44.2 | 11.5 | 100.0 | | |
| 3 | Petty business | 36.4 | 53.0 | 10.6 | 100.0 | | |
| 4 | Professional | 27.3 | 63.6 | 9.1 | 100.0 | | |
| 5 | Home maker | 25.0 | 56.3 | 18.8 | 100.0 | | |
| Land owned | | | | | | | |
| 1 | landless | 28.7 | 59.0 | 12.3 | 100.0 | 21.706 | 0.017 |
| 2 | Up to 0.4 | 32.7 | 48.1 | 19.2 | 100.0 | | |
| 3 | 0.4 - 1.0 | 38.1 | 42.9 | 19.0 | 100.0 | | |
| 4 | 1.1-2.0 | 28.6 | 71.4 | 0.0 | 100.0 | | |
| 5 | 2.1-4.0 | 16.7 | 50.0 | 33.3 | 100.0 | | |
| 6 | 4.0 plus | 25.0 | 50.0 | 25.0 | 100.0 | | |
| Income | | | | | | | |
| 1 | less than 10 | 25.4 | 59.4 | 15.2 | 100.0 | 22.210 | 0.005 |
| 2 | 11-25 | 37.5 | 48.2 | 14.3 | 100.0 | | |
| 3 | 26-50 | 34.4 | 46.9 | 18.8 | 100.0 | | |
| 4 | 51-100 | 83.3 | 16.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 | | |
| 5 | 100 Plus | 25.0 | 62.5 | 12.5 | 100.0 | | |
| Total | | 30.8 | 54.2 | 15.0 | 100.0 | | |

Table 1 above shows the percentage distribution of respondents and chi square for social, economic and demographic characteristics of the respondents with different levels of people's

participation. As the table show, except for sex all the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the respondents have a significant association with people's participation. While marital status of the respondents has a significant association with people's participation at 0.020, caste has a significant association with participation at 0.030; age at 0.013; education at 0.007; occupation at 0.001; land owning pattern at 0.017; and income at 0.005.

Whether panchayat election is a ritual that people observe once every five years or is it something that people attach importance to and feel proud of? In order to assess the ground reality, a set of questions were posted to them (table 2): When were the last gram panchayat elections held? Did you vote in the last panchayat election? Do you think that the panchayat election was fairly conducted? Do you feel that it really matters whether you vote? A little over 14 percent of the respondents answered correctly when the last panchayat elections were held (table 2). They were not asked to give precise details like the day or month but only the year.³ Responding to the next question in table 2, an overwhelming majority (85 per cent) of the respondents believed that the elections were fairly conducted. More than 80 per cent of the sampled respondents believed that their vote mattered. If it is real participation in a lively affair that takes place once in five years, then it was assumed that some, if not all, voters, as principal stakeholders in the system, must have participated in the campaign. In order to know the extent of their participation, they were asked whether they: (a) attended election meetings; (b) participated in rallies; (c) pasted wall posters; (d) wrote graffiti; (e) distributed handbills/pamphlets; and (f) engaged in door-to-door campaigns. They were surprised by these questions, as if organizing election meetings, not to speak of writing graffiti and attending rallies was something they had never witnessed nor heard of. A large number of respondents from all the four-gram panchayats expressed bewilderment when faced with these set of questions. In fact, more than half the respondents did not react to these questions. In other words, apart from attending election meetings, which score 79.2 percent, less than 20 per cent of the villagers had participated in the campaign. The very fact that a few had participated in election campaigns confirms that all these modes were adopted during the panchayat election. If it is so, then why did a very large number of people feign ignorance? Does this mean that

³ The first panchayat elections in Manipur were held in September 1996, the second round of Panchayat elections in Manipur was held in October 2001, third round of Panchayat elections in Manipur were held in August 2007.

somehow people do not find it necessary to participate in the election campaigns? If these facts are true (it is difficult to come to a conclusion based on a limited sample), this is an indication of alienation. The evidence collected from all the study panchayats confirms that longevity of the panchayats in the state has not led to their institutionalization, as is apparent from the fact less than 16 per cent people had confirmed attending election meetings. In Tellou Channa Seijang GP, the local elite have managed to subvert the election process by substituting it with 'consensus'. Is it surprise then that, despite being in existence for a long time, the village panchayats have not gone closer to the people? In the study panchayats, periodic panchayat elections are yet to become institutionalized. Panchayat elections had not been a regular, periodic feature in these parts of the state. It was observed that more than 90 per cent of the respondents had cast their votes, and that practically all those who had voted had done so in all seriousness, realizing that their vote mattered. 'It determines victory or defeat of the contestants,' they explained. In view of the political past of the panchayats in the state, the voter turnout was indeed impressive. In addition, it gives some credence as to why a large number of people unhesitatingly questioned the fairness of the gram panchayat election. Were they equally enthusiastic about the election campaign? Given the extent of the positive response to this question, it is apparent that the panchayat election has evoked great interest among the people. This is apparent from the fact that those who attended the election meetings constituted less than 16 per cent of the respondents. When asked whether any political party leader or MLA came for campaigning in the area, an overwhelming majority (98%) of the respondents said, 'no'. Differences of opinion or perception are quite logical, more so when there is great diversity in the background of the respondents. Yet different answers to an innocuous question like this seem baffling. No outsider, either MLA or any other political leader, would have gone campaigning in the area without being noticed. In other words, if political leaders have visited the panchayats on the eve of elections, the people must have seen them. If it is so then why there is so much inconsistency on this issue? What was the reality? Crosschecking with key informants proved futile to ascertain the facts since none of them was certain whether any political leader came for campaigning. After all, the GP election was held three years earlier, and given the cynicism about political leaders, people cannot be faulted for not remembering such facts. This does not mean, however, that the election campaign had no substance in other Gram Panchayats. In answer to the question, whether the candidates approached the people

before election, nearly 90 per cent respondents answered in the affirmative. By reading the answers of both these set of questions, it appears that the campaign for panchayat election is akin to one-way traffic. People receive handbills, see leaders coming to their village, are approached by candidates, but they themselves do not take the initiative or feel any urge to participate in the campaigning. Why? This could be explained in many ways. First, they are not interested, since they do not feel they have a stake in the institution. Second, because of the monopoly of a single political party⁴ there is no space or scope left for them. Third, the ruling party does not allow others to penetrate in their area. Fourth, panchayats as an institution are so completely under the sway of the cadres of the ruling party that others do not feel inclined to associate themselves with these institutions. Is it a surprise then if a majority of them had no idea what promises the candidates had made during the last elections? Nearly half the sampled voters admitted to having received handbills. Again, irrespective of the varying response, peoples' affirmative answer to this question was a validation of the fact that handbills were indeed distributed. However, the fact remains that everybody did not receive them. Why? Were they unable to recall accurately? Alternatively, was it that the distribution mechanism was not well laid down? It could have been a combination of both factors. What is significant here is that people (though may not be in large numbers) have also started looking at the panchayat elections as an important event and have become involved. What is more interesting is the fact that more than two-third of the respondents said they even remembered the election eve promises made by the sarpanch. What were those promises? No one was sure, but they continued, saying, 'construction of inter-village-roads (IVR), sorting out drinking water problems, construction of community hall, digging of public ponds, construction of crematorium, etc.' In a nutshell, they named the same issues⁵ that the GPs are concerned with

⁴ In Haraorou Tangkham, the MPC (Manipur Pradesh Congress) had a dominant presence at the local level government. With majority of the ward members having been affiliated to this party, there is little space for other political party and the people to provide checks on the operation of panchayat functionaries. The same is also true to Laipham Khunnou GP, Sawombung GP, and Tellou Channa Seijang GP where the INC, NCP, and CPI (M) were the respective dominant party.

⁵ 'For many of the respondents, political issues and elections appear trivial or remote or beyond the reach of their influence. Of a different magnitude are issues that directly affect them like; provision of daily wages in case of agricultural labourers, punctuality of the teachers in taking classes to parents or playing the role of true arbiters in case of disputes, etc. unfortunately, these issues are hardly raised during elections, or even when raised hardly followed up by elected members,' argues Peter Bachrach (1969:103). Therefore, he puts emphasis on 'political education', which he considers 'most effective on the level, which challenges the

and what they do with funds of centrally and state-sponsored schemes once they are elected. True, this is what the aspirants normally promise. However, how did the candidates differ in their approach in convincing their voters about their desire and their capability to deliver those promises? Election eve promises are hardly acted upon. This is something that people have experienced over the years. Therefore, they cannot be faulted if they do not care for what they perceive as useless promises. However, could they be equally unconcerned regarding the persons whom they elect to run the local-level institutions? This indifference towards local-level institutions upsets the prospects of the decentralization project. Elected panchayat leaders, unlike the higher-level representatives, remain very much present amidst the people who elect them. People need not wait for the Gram Sabha meetings or visit the Gram Panchayat office to interact with them. People anywhere in the village can approach representatives. Yet people do not choose to communicate with them. This can happen in two situations. First, if the leaders are perceived as useless, powerless and ineffective. Second, if the people realize that their representatives are arrogant or too powerful to talk to ordinary people. The latter option could be applicable in the case of one or two upper-caste, rich representatives, but it cannot be tenable for all of them. It may not be true in the case of pradhan/sarpanch. For people know that the majority of their representatives happen to be the proxies of the elite. This is even truer of those representatives who enter panchayats through reserved constituencies. In order to assess the extent of their awareness, respondents were asked to name the local pradhan and other office bearers of the PRIs elected from their areas. The findings, as presented in Table 5.1a are predictably on the expected lines. Majority of the respondents could effortlessly identify who their respective pradhans were. This in itself was a proof of the importance attached to the office of the village panchayat pradhan. This was largely true of their ward representatives as well, but not in case of the deputy pradhan. In appreciation of the importance of the village panchayat, it should be noted that the institution of the deputy pradhan was created. It was expected that, in perfect tune with organizational principles, she/he would officiate for her/his boss in the absence of the later, but given the real appropriation of the socio-political space by the pradhan, his deputy is yet to be properly located in the popular image of the villagers. Hence, the differences in the response across the four GPs on this count. However, it is entirely

individual to engage cooperatively in the solution of concrete problems affecting himself and his immediate community, (ibid.).

different when it comes to recognizing the heads of the Zilla Parishad. It happens to be remote entities in the structural frames of decentralization, with no apparent links to the village panchayats. Indeed the offices of these upper tiers of the panchayat system are located at a considerable physical distance. It is in due appreciation of the remoteness, both physical and functional, that the response to the relevant questions could be better understood. Those who claimed to have known the panchayat secretary and the Zilla parishad president were fewer in number. What happen after the elections? When were the panchayat board constituted? When were the GP meetings taken place? These are popular refrains. In order to go a bit deeper, the respondents were asked two questions: (a) at what interval do the GP meetings take place? (b) What transpires in those meetings? Almost 90 per cent of the respondents in the study panchayats did not have any clue about the periodicity of GP meetings and majority of those who said 'yes' to this question, had no clue as to what used to transpire in those meetings. Does this mean that the GPs have no place in peoples' collective memories? Alternatively, is it that there is no transparency in GP meetings including the dates of the meetings held? The response of the first question in this set reveals that people do not attach much importance to the office of gram panchayat and there is every reason for that; the panchayats have not done anything substantial in their respective territorial jurisdictions, especially in those fields where they were expected to delivered most. This includes providing drinking water, provision of streetlights, improvement of (IVR) inter-village roads, and redressal of peoples' grievances etc.⁶ To ascertain whether people are alienated from their panchayats or were keeping regular contact with their panchayats, and whether the contact was a one-way traffic or whether there were attempts from both sides particularly in the post-election phases, the respondents were asked whether the pradhans visited them in the aftermath of the election and whether they had acknowledged the contribution of their respective gram panchayats. The survey result reveals that, the chief executive of the gram panchayats visited only 10 per cent of the respondents. Not surprisingly enough, the contact here was only a one-way traffic; people do not take any initiative to approach their pradhans. On the other hand, the chief executives of the gram panchayats always took initiatives to approach those people who happened to be their supporters. Therefore, it is not a surprise to see that only 3 per cent of the respondents

⁶ Most of the core functions constitutionally assigned to the panchayats still remain with the various departments of the state government. These facts could be ascertained by having a look at the devolution index given in preceding chapter of the present study.

acknowledge the contribution of the gram panchayats in their respective areas with respect to school; 20 percent (water supply); 35 percent (road); 2 percent (streetlights); 15 percent (sanitations); and 10 percent (housing) and here too, the acknowledgements were not genuine.⁷ The next question was: how many sitting members contested the last elections and how many of them retained their position? In addition, did they feel that those who won the second time were rewarded for their good work (read honesty, sense of responsibility and integrity)? In answer to the first set of question, almost 90 per cent of the respondents in the four study panchayats could not give an appropriate answer. An overwhelming majority of the respondents 90 - 95 per cent, had no idea as to who contested the GP elections for the second time, but the same number of respondents (i.e. 90 - 95 per cent) had confidently responded that no single candidate had been elected to the same post for the second consecutive term. In other election-related questions like, whether they think that the panchayat elections give an opportunity to the electorate to reject corrupt or inefficient members and whether they feel that there were far more deserving people who could not contested the last panchayat elections, the responses recorded in Table 5.2 invoke mixed feelings. Those who believed that by exercising their ballot power they could defeat the undeserving representatives/candidates were relatively more in number than those who felt that by applying the same instrument they could reward the deserving persons. On the surface, it sounds slightly confusing, but reading the implied sense of their answer, one would be tempted to appreciate the maturity of the voters. It does indicate that voters seem to be aware of the limitations of what they can achieve through the democratic process. Simply put, they have no voice in the selection of candidates. Therefore, even if there is an honest, sincere sitting member, she/he may not be in the race for the post in the first place for many reasons. Even if she/he manages to do this, there is no guarantee of success. People have imbibed this practical wisdom long ago. Another set of questions pertaining to the next elections were posed. Table 2 shows that the proportion of respondents who were confident of the next panchayat elections being held on time was high (80%). Interestingly enough, the proportion of the respondents who would be disappointed if the panchayat elections were not held on time did not comprise even one-fifth (24%) of the total respondents. The puzzling

⁷ More than 90 per cent of the respondents who have acknowledged the contribution of gram panchayats in their respective areas were not very clear in their perceptions regarding the contribution of the gram panchayats. Acknowledgement of the contribution of gram panchayats in all the study panchayats was confined only to the implementation of MREGS programmes.

question here is, why would they remain unconcerned particularly when they are aware of the opportunities the election provides and also believe in the might of their votes and went to participate in the panchayat elections? Does it not show the social distance between the local body institution and the people? On the other hand, should we hazard a guess that they do recognize the usefulness of panchayats, but when they weight their perceptions against personal benefits, they do not feel encouraged? After all, the direct beneficiaries have largely, if not always, been poor people. Among them many, do not even comprehend the implications of direct democracy. On the contrary, the benefits they reap are considered to be the blessings of the local elite. In any case, this represents a case of incomplete institutionalization. To the final question as to how many of them, given a chance, would like to contest the next elections, an overwhelming majority (98%) of the total respondents said 'no'. In fact, they offered interesting explanations for this. A large number of them, for instance, said, they disliked politics or party politics. Some of them even said that the job of an elected representative is troublesome, which they would not like to invite upon themselves, or being homemakers or agricultural labourers, they could not afford the spare time to assume the responsibilities of an elected representatives. Likewise, a large number of illiterate respondents candidly confessed that they were unsuitable for the job. In their wisdom, they felt that an elected panchayat leader must be an educated person. A few of them also said that they disliked being controlled by the political party or did not like the interference of political party in running the affairs of the gram panchayat.

Table 2: Per cent distribution of respondents by indicators of People's participation

| Sl. No. | People's participation | Don't know | Yes | No | No. of respondents |
|---------|--|------------|------|-------|--------------------|
| 1 | Knew when the GP election was held | 55.0 | 14.2 | 30.8 | 100.0 |
| 2 | Voted in the last GP election | .8 | 95.0 | 4.3 | 100.0 |
| 3 | Vouched fair conduct of last GP election | 1.7 | 85.0 | 13.3 | 100.0 |
| 4 | Doesn't matter whether voted or not | 1.7 | 80.0 | 17.5 | 100.0 |
| 5 | Attended election meetings | | 5.8 | 94.16 | 100.0 |
| 6 | Participated in rallies/campaigns | | 17.5 | 82.5 | 100.0 |
| 7 | Pasted wall posters | | 33.3 | 66.7 | 100.0 |
| 8 | Wrote graffiti | | 21.7 | 78.3 | 100.0 |
| 9 | Distributed handbills | | 21.7 | 78.3 | 100.0 |
| 10 | Door-to-door campaign | | 44.2 | 55.8 | 100.0 |
| 11 | Any political leader campaigned | 7 | 3 | 90 | 100.0 |
| 12 | Approached by candidates | | 64 | 36 | 100.0 |
| 13 | Received handbills | | 75 | 25 | 100.0 |

| | | | | | |
|----|---|--|----|-------|-------|
| 14 | Have you remember election | | 18 | 82 | 100.0 |
| 15 | Promises offered by the candidates? | | | | |
| 16 | Recalling name of Pradhan/Sarpanch | | 80 | 20 | 100.0 |
| 17 | Recalling name of Deputy Pradhan | | 20 | 80 | 100.0 |
| 18 | Recalling name of Ward member | | 75 | 25 | 100.0 |
| 19 | Recalling name of Panchayat Secretary | | 18 | 82 | 100.0 |
| 20 | Recalling name of ZP President | | 12 | 88 | 100.0 |
| 21 | Knowledge of Periodicity of GP meetings | | 10 | 90 | 100.0 |
| 22 | Knowledge of what transpires in meetings | | 5 | 95 | 100.0 |
| 23 | Visited by Pradhan | | 10 | 90 | 100.0 |
| 24 | Visited by Ward members | | 15 | 85 | 100.0 |
| 25 | Acknowledge contribution of GP in Water | | | | |
| 26 | Supply | | 20 | 80 | 100.0 |
| 27 | Acknowledge contribution of GP in Schools | | 3 | 97 | 100.0 |
| 28 | Acknowledge contribution of GP in Roads | | 35 | 65 | 100.0 |
| 29 | Acknowledge contribution of GP in Streetlights | | 0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| 30 | Acknowledge contribution of GP in Sanitations | | 2 | 98 | 100.0 |
| 31 | Acknowledge contribution of GP in Housing | | 15 | 85 | 100.0 |
| 32 | Acknowledge contribution of GP in Infrastructure | | 10 | 90 | 100.0 |
| 33 | Panchayat Leaders contesting second time | | 5 | 95 | 100.0 |
| 34 | Panchayat Leaders elected second time | | 5 | 95 | 100.0 |
| 35 | Opportunity provided by election: Defeat corrupt sitting members/candidates | | 54 | 46 | 100.0 |
| 36 | Opportunity provided by election: Reward deserving ones | | 48 | 52 | 100.0 |
| 37 | Knew when the Next election were due | | 11 | 89 | 100.0 |
| 38 | Sure of next election being on time | | 80 | 20 | 100.0 |
| 39 | Disappointed if next election not held on time | | 24 | 76 | 100.0 |
| 40 | Would like to contest in the next election | | 2 | 98 | 100.0 |

Table 3 shows the level of total score obtained for different indicators of people's participation. Score one is given for "Yes" and zero for "No" for each indication reported by respondents. Scores are then added together for all indications and divided into three categories: low (11 or less score), medium (12-16) and high (17 or more score). As the table 3 show, people's participation is low at the level of 30.8 per cent; medium at the level of 54.2 per cent; and high at the level of 15.0 per cent.

Table 3: People's participation Index

| Sl. No. | Index | No. | Per cent |
|--------------|----------------|------------|--------------|
| 1 | Low (<11) | 74 | 30.8 |
| 2 | Medium (12-16) | 130 | 54.2 |
| 3 | High (>17) | 36 | 15.0 |
| Total | | 240 | 100.0 |

Profile of Respondents Who Attended Gram Sabha Meetings⁸

The social and demographic-economic background of the respondents attending the gram sabha meetings is presented in Tables 5 and 6 below. Although the entries in these tables are largely self-explanatory, a brief interpretation of the recorded data would be in order to explain the variations noticed across the panchayats covered in the study.

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents attending and not attending Gram Sabha Meetings

| Sl. No. | Respondents | No. | Percentage |
|---------|-----------------------------------|-----|------------|
| 1 | Attending Gram Sabha | 84 | 35 |
| 2 | Not attending Gram Sabha Meetings | 156 | 65 |

Table 5: Social Characteristics of Respondents Attending Gram Sabha Meetings

| Sl. No. | Social Characteristics | No. | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------------------|-----|------------|
| Caste | | | |
| 1 | Upper caste | 42 | 50 |
| 2 | OBC | 23 | 27.3 |
| 3 | SC/ST | 13 | 15.4 |
| 4 | Others | 6 | 7.14 |
| Education | | | |
| 1 | Illiterate | 44 | 52.3 |
| 2 | Primary | 26 | 30.9 |
| 3 | Secondary | 14 | 16.6 |
| 4 | Graduate | 0.0 | 0.00 |
| Occupation | | | |
| 1 | Agricultural labourer | 34 | 40.4 |
| 2 | Marginal farmer | 24 | 28.5 |
| 3 | Petty business | 20 | 23.8 |
| 4 | Service | 0.0 | 0.00 |

⁸ Tables and percentage scores obtained from responses of those who attended the Sabha and the subsequent analysis hereafter, only supplemented the analysis of the various indicators of people's participation and do not form part of the chi square and logistic regression analysis.

| | | | |
|--------------|--------|-----------|------------|
| 5 | Others | 6 | 7.14 |
| Total | | 84 | 100 |

Table 6: Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Respondents attending Gram Sabha Meetings

| | Demographic and Economic Characteristics | No. | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|---|------------|-------------------|
| Sex | | | |
| 1 | Men | 57 | 67.8 |
| 2 | Women | 27 | 32.14 |
| Age | | | |
| 1 | 18-29 | 20 | 23.8 |
| 2 | 30-45 | 32 | 38 |
| 3 | 46-55 | 28 | 33.3 |
| 4 | 55 plus | 4 | 4.76 |
| Land owned (in hectare) | | | |
| 1 | Landless | 46 | 54.7 |
| 2 | Up to 0.4 | 24 | 28.5 |
| 3 | 0.5-1.0 | 8 | 9.52 |
| 4 | 1,1-2.0 | 2 | 2.38 |
| 5 | 2.1-4.0 | 4 | 4.76 |
| Income (in thousands) | | | |
| 1 | Less than 10 | 46 | 54.7 |
| 2 | 11-25 | 26 | 30.9 |
| 3 | 26-50 | 12 | 14.2 |
| | Total | 84 | 100 |

Table 4 above shows that only 35 per cent of the respondents have admitted to having attended the Gram Sabhas. Of the 84 respondents who have admitted to having attended the Gram Sabha, 57 (67.8%) were men and 27 (32.14%) were women. With only meager per cent women among the respondents who admitted to having attended the gram sabha meetings, the record seems very unimpressive. In fact, a large number of upper-caste women, who admitted never having attended any such meetings, indignantly pronounced that the sabha was not the place for them. This was also true of women from prosperous OBC and SC/ST families. The impression has gained ground over the years that the gram sabha is the place where only poor men/women go seeking some benefits following from various welfare schemes doled out by the centre and the state. Though SC/STs form the bulk of the poor, and are in fact the poorest segment of the, their proportion among the respondents covered in this study was disproportionately lower. Given the numerical strength of the dominant castes in all the study panchayats, the scheduled Castes and

even backward caste people prefer to keep themselves away from gram panchayats. In Sawombung GP, the STs along with the upper Castes people seem to enjoy a monopoly over the SCs and the OBCs. The next issue was the age group of the people in this category. Do people of all age groups - young, middle-aged and old alike display equal interest in the gram sabha meetings? Looking at the recorded data on this point (Table.6), there is heavy concentration of the people of the mature age group (30 - 45 years). However, the fact is that people belonging to practically all age groups seem to have registered their presence. In terms of educational level, illiterates, neo-literates are overwhelmingly predominant. Farmers, marginal farmers-cum-agricultural labourers and landless agricultural labourer - cum daily wage earners were almost in equal numbers among the respondents except the fact that their distributions across the panchayats are not equal. In terms of landholding size, the sample from the four panchayats show different pictures. However, overall, landless respondents recorded the highest percentage (54.7%) in terms of participation in Gram Sabha (table 6). Not surprisingly, the proportion of respondents belonging to the low-income category was the highest in terms of participation in Gram Sabha meetings. Surprisingly, 14.2 per cent of those who had more than Rs. 25,000 annual income have admitted to having attended the Gram Sabhas. Whereas 30.9 per cent of respondents belonging to the annual income group of 11-15000 have admitted to having attended the Gram Sabha Meetings. Despite the very low level of attendance in gram sabhas in the study panchayats, efforts were made to see the peoples' impressions of the village assembly discourses. Did they find the sabhas useful? Did it prompt them to participate again? This question was taken up with all the people interviewed in course of the study, irrespective of whether they attended any such meetings. Indeed, respondents were asked to explain whether they had seen or heard of a Gram Sabha meet in session. As was expected, many pleaded ignorance, saying they had 'no idea', as they had never attended or heard of such meetings. However, there were a large number of people who had never attended a meeting, but were informed about the proceedings of the Gram Sabha, which in turn had prompted them to take a conscious decision not to participate in any such gatherings in future. 'Waste of time' is how many commented on Gram Sabha meets. Why? 'They do not discuss annual plans or budget of the Gram Panchayat or for that matter, a review of the on-going progression of works; all they do is dole out money to the beneficiaries of certain welfare schemes. At the most, they receive petitions from prospective beneficiaries. Alternatively, they do not even select beneficiaries in

the meetings'. This was a common and oft-repeated view, explaining why people prefer to ignore the sabha. There is an element of truth in this statement, uttered by several respondents practically in all the surveyed villages. Is this all that happens in the course of the village level discourse in the gram sabha? This issue is examined here from the perspectives of three sets of respondents. The first set comprises those who attended the gram sabha but remained largely silent spectators. This is followed by the testimonies of those who claimed to have actively participated in the discourse. Finally, we have the comments of those respondents who were quite critical of the so-called village discourse.

Conclusion

From the long narratives in this chapter, combining individual and group experiences, as well as the analysis of data presented through tables, following points emerge: First, the overall picture emerging out of the analysis of tables 1 to 6 is somewhat akin to the unfinished task of decentralization, irrespective of the lifespan of decentralized panchayati raj institutions in the state. The responses delineated from tables 1 to 6 evoke mixed feelings, combining satisfaction and optimism as well as pessimism and despair. The respondents (varying between half to two-thirds) not only take interest in panchayat elections but also actively participated in electioneering. Many of them could even recall the promises made by the aspirants to local government office during the last elections. All this was validated by a large voter turnout in all the four panchayats covered, where quite a large number of respondents also believed that their vote matters. At another level, a large number of respondents preferred to keep mum when supplementary but equally significant questions pertaining to elections were asked. For instance, they (ranging between 40 to 56 per cent on the average in the four panchayats) were sure that election offered them an opportunity to weed out undeserving/corrupt candidates/sitting members. However, when they were faced with its corollary-'whether those who won second time were rewarded for their good performance records'- their perceived wisdom prompted them not to hazard any guess. In all the sampled panchayats, nearly two-thirds of the respondents also vouched for fair panchayat elections and equal number of respondents were sure of the next panchayat elections being held on time. This reveals a high level of confidence people have on the State machinery. On the other side, the awareness parameters of the respondents seem to be on the downside in all the panchayats covered in the study. To begin with, the respondents

(varying between 67 to 85 per cent on the average in all the four panchayats) seem to be unaware of what their elected representatives are doing and what they have done in their respective areas. This is evident from the fact that only 5 to 12 per cent on the average in all the sampled panchayats have acknowledge panchayat's contributions in their respective areas. On an average, 30 per cent of the respondents have a fair knowledge of the timing of the next elections and a very meager 5 per cent of the respondents knew about the periodicity of the Gram Panchayat meetings. The above two contrasting observations seem to be puzzling. People took active participation in panchayat elections thinking that their vote matters a lot to decide the fate of a government, which, through their active intervention in the form of election, would effectively deliver services to them. Yet, they are not aware of the functioning of this very government. The explanation to this phenomenon could be that, the presence of panchayati raj institutions is widely recognized by the people; they are educating the people and are playing a role in the development of rural infrastructure, but not serving all intended functions, as demonstrated by their inability to foster transparency, accountability and participation. Secondly, participation in GS meetings is largely low in the sampled panchayats. In practically all the sampled villages, people had gone to the meetings with their respective wish lists, demanding or expecting some personal benefit. The fact that more than two-thirds majority of the respondents in all the sampled panchayats who have admitted of having attended the GS are prospective beneficiaries of different schemes, confirms this point. Finally, the gram sabha in its present set-up has a limited role to play. The point that the gram sabha is entrusted with a larger functional domain is blurred with its mistaken identity as a forum for the disbursement of state largesse. Pradhans and other influential people dominate decision-making process in the sabhas. As marginalised groups are economically dependent on the rural elites, they hesitate to raise their voice against them in the meetings. In the Sampled panchayats, GS is only for namesake; in most of the cases, pradhans and members take all decisions without consulting it. Although project proposals are put before the GS in its general meetings for approval, due to lack of monitoring and auditing of programmes/projects and lack of motivation among them, very few members usually attend the general meetings. Most of the GS members do not have understanding of the powers and responsibilities given to them under the Act. Sometimes, pradhans do not involve up-pradhans and members of the opposition in decision-making process. In order to avoid their involvement in decision-making about selection of proposals, pradhans usually try to get the proposals approved

in the general meetings, which are mostly dominated people close to the pradhan and those who expect to be selected as beneficiaries the various central and state sponsored schemes.

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