

WORKING OF GRAMSABHAS IN KARNATAKA : AN EMPIRICAL EVALUATION

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Decentralization has been a panacea to the many ills of maladministration, corruption, redundancy etc. Visualizing this in a true democracy, decentralization was seen as a boon to raise the levels of democratic participation and to ensure that the people in a given geographical area are left to manage their own affairs. India having had the experiences of republic since the Vedic period of course, was not new to decentralized administration.¹ The history of decentralization, democratization and panchayat raj in India thus is a pathfinder to many of the neo-colonial and postcolonial states around the world. Since the Balvantrai Mehta committee report in India, democratic decentralization has been quite successfully functioning, with enough autonomy given to each state to design their own three tier, two tier or a single tier system in lieu of their socio-political, economic and cultural needs. One thing however that is common in all these exercises is the attempt made by subsequent governments to take administration nearer to the people. Grama Sabha thus formed the closest unit of administration in this system. These Gramsabhas structurally are the smallest units of administration having restricted area, minimum population having behind its philosophy the direct democracy of the Athenian "kind. The difference that one finds when one speaks about Gramsabhas in the State of Karnataka is that the state of Karnataka has not merely established Gramsabhas to delegate the powers, but has clearly charged the Gram Sabhas with the important task of development.

Development being a desired goal to be reached for the benefit of the people given to the local context and needs cannot hope to be shaped well by the people other than by those who desire it.² This truly is an innovative concept of designing development with full control over the process by the local people themselves, involving in full the members of the community itself, this perhaps in the reason why Gramsabhas have today attracted academicians across the world. Panchayat raj system therefore is seen as an unit which effectively helps the designated purpose of development by involving the people at the targeted level through organically linking the different levels of decentralized units from Gramsabha to the state.

The choice of the area for this study was made in Haven taluk which is one of the newly formed districts in Northern Karnataka. The villages chosen for the study were Kurubgond and Kallapur. The choice of these villages was based on the method of understanding the impact of proximity or distance of a village to a taluk place and its effects on working of Gramsabhas. Given to the context of varied variables that operate at different levels and in different forms at the rural local level, These infact, have an influence over the working of political institutions such as Gramsabhas, in a given geographical area. It is important to discuss here as to how the structure of the village societies, the varied variables with in the society such as education, economy, land holding etc. influences the political process of the smallest unit of administration viz., gramsabha. Gramsabha's given to its context of a community life, where the people are dependent largely on the state, where people interact face to face on a daily basis, faces a number of problem in its functioning. Kondajji Basappa Committee Report, in fact in 1962 observed that the Gram panchayat itself was as a small unit of administration and as such was not viable interms of its economy. The report further observed that the co-existing communities that interact on a daily basis does not work to promote the efficiency of Gram Panchayats in matters connected to mobilizing finance for development purposes. Such criticism was later reiterated by the formation of mandal panchayats by 1983 Act. However in 1993 and subsequently by the congress government favoured the grama panchayats and gramsabhas. In the height of these issues the survey was conducted in the study area through participant observation method having as unstructured questionnaire, which involved basic questions that related to the question of cognizance, evaluation and the development orientation of these institutions.

Brief Profile of the villages:

Kurubgonda and Kallapur are the study areas chosen for indepth analysis to understand the working of Gramsabhas in detail. Kurubgonda is a village, which is at a distance of 8 kilometers from the taluk place viz., Haveri. The village is about one kilometer radius having a population of around 15,000 with an average literacy rate of 40% with primary school as minimum education and roughly about 8% having higher education starting from the bachelor degree and above. The population of women to the total population is less than half with literacy rate falling below 3%. In spite of these social factors, the village seems to be economically quite well off over the years and there is also a chance to see more of its improvement in the light of Haveri being convenient as a district. The total landholding varies somewhere between two to 100 acres representing the landholding pattern as found elsewhere in the Northern Karnataka.

There are also irrigated and unirrigated lands with the pattern of landholding varying from 100 acres to 200 acres. This great divide is quite apparent to those who visit this village. The major crop is Jawar and Maize. Recently after Haveri's formation as a district, diversification of the agricultural produce and growing of day to day vegetables etc., is noticed is on an increase, this in fact, is empowering the small land holders. In comparison to this, Kallapur village which is about 12 kilometers from Haveri having a half a kilometer radius with a population of about 100 families, which is about 2000 population is not really a very big village. In this village the land distribution is also not very encouraging and the facilities for irrigation are comparatively less. Economically and educationally it is rather backward compared with the average set for the district. However it is noticed that some of the educated from this village have migrated for good and have not come back to the village. Keeping these comparative perspectives it is for any researcher to legitimately assess the working of Gramsabhas in these villages.

Having profiled these study areas as discussed above, let us now turn to analyze the data collected as sample, to understand the working of the gram sabhas. The size of the respondents chosen was on the basis of the total population of these villages of which only 0.01 percent was taken up. This clearly gave us 150 respondents in Kurubgonda village alone which has a population of nearly 15,000. In Kallapur the choice of respondents was only 20, since the population here is 2000 only. The total therefore was about 170 respondents together. The unstructured questionnaire was aimed primarily at assessing the awareness factor to evaluate the effectiveness of the working of Gramsabhas (See Table 1.)

Table - 1

I. Are you aware of your gram sabha?

(Yes/No)

Total number of respondents	Yes	No	No Answer	Total
170	69	81	20	170
Total%	40.6	47.64	11.76	100.00

This table clearly indicates that majority of them (47.64%) were not clearly aware of the Gramsabhas and its functioning while 40.6% were aware of their Gramsabhas and nearly 11.76% did not have an answer for the question. Having understood this, it was further investigated to learn why there was a lack of know how of their Gramsabhas. The results especially from the village Kallapur indicated to the fact that the Gram Sabhas were not functioning regularly and this irregularity has been almost so redundant that the Gramsabha in their particular village has failed to meet even after a year and half. This apart, lack of publicity, lack of availability of literature, lack of initiative from the leadership, lack of spare time to learn about these institutions by the labour class which invariably migrate to district places are also some of the reasons for this lack of awareness. Many of the earlier studies conducted similarly elsewhere in Karnataka has also discussed these problems. Therefore it is pertinent here to recapitulate that the success of any institution primarily demands proper socialization of the information about these institutions.

The second question that was addressed to these respondents who were carefully selected on a random method through the voters list. After giving them a brief about the Gramsabhas, its functioning, its statutory position; there by creating awareness about Gramsabha, the question relating to its performance was asked to know from their as to how they evaluated the performance of Gramsabhas including the past experiences they have had.

Table - 2

II. How do you evaluate the performance of your gram sabha?

Total no. of respondents	Satisfactory %	Not Satisfactory	No answer	Total
170	84	85	01	170
Total %	49.4%	50%	0.58%	99.98%

The above table though slightly confusing clearly indicates that the performance of Gramsabha in those villages seems to be promising (49.4%) with a thin margin of variation of those who believe that the Gramsabhas are not performing satisfactorily (50%). In the logical sequence of the earlier question, the people of Kallapur village

who did not really have the experience of gramsabha functioning for the past one and a half-year though had no occasion to evaluate performance felt that in the light of their past experience the gramsabha performed satisfactorily. Thus the variation of a percent between those who seem to believe that the Gramsabhas are not satisfactorily performing could be ignored. However four reasons were detected to verify the exact reason for the non-performance or not satisfactory performance of gramsabhas.

Table -2 (a)

2(a) If not satisfactory, what are the reasons?

- A) Information about gram sabha is not available
- B) Gramsabha meetings are irregularly held.
- C) The meetings of gramsabhas are not published in advance
- D) All the above E) Do not know

TOTAL	A	B	C	D	E	Total
170	25	30	25	50	40	170
Total %	14.70%	17.64%	14.70%	29.41%	23.52%	99.97%

The above table clearly indicates that the most of the respondents seem to believe (29.41) that all the reasons mentioned above are the reasons, for the dissatisfactory functioning of the gramsabhas, while nearly 23.52% did not answer the question. Another 14.70% believed that the information about Gram Sabha is not available and according to them, it is this lack of information that fails to attract the gramsabha members for the meeting.⁴ Similarly, another 14.70% believe that the Gramasabha meetings are not published in advance which amounts to a similar answer as seen above. Though redundant, it confirms the fact that the meeting notice of gramsabha is invariably hidden and this causes loss of attendance. About 17.64% of people believe that the grama sabha meetings are held irregularly and that causes the dissatisfactory performance of gram sabhas. The overall assessment of this reasoning is indicative of the fact that despite the attempts to mobilize people's participation and to provide them a forum, the gram sabhas have not been successful due to the callousness of the lower bureaucratic ranks. A remedy for this need to be found out.

In order to understand the impact of the working of Gram sabhas on the socio-political life of the village a direct question to the respondents was asked requesting them to identify as to what impact they have had on their life of the Gramsabhas.

Table - 3 III. Has Gramsabha made any impact on your life?

(Yes/No)

Total no. of Respondent	Yes	No	Total
170	88	82	170
Total %	51.74	48.23	99.97

About 51.76% believe that there has been an impact on their life. While 48.23% do not see any impact on their life through the working of Gramsabha. An investigation made further revealed answer that the question regarding those who preferred to say that there is an impact on their life due to working of Gramsabha, replied to a subsidiary question. The responses were primarily taken note of as narrated by the respondents and were regrouped for the purposes of research findings. These groupings were given sub-heading such as Democratization, Political Emancipation and Social Consciousness. As a result, we found nearly 30% of them had given answers that could be grouped under all the 3 sub headings identified above. About 11% of them favored democratization and social emancipation and nearly the same percent (10.76) identified political emancipation as identifiable effects that they have on their lives through the working of Gramsabhas. Further in order to verify the effectiveness of the functioning of Gram Sabhas a question was constructed to assess repeatedly under a different garb the working of Gramsabha. To this extent a question was put to the respondents, which is detailed below.

Table - 4

IV. How do you evaluate the working of Gramsabha?

- (a) Successful
- (b) Partially successful
- (c) Not successful
- (d) Do not know

Total number of respondents	A	B	C	D	Total
170	45	49	39	37	170
Total%	26.47%	28.82%	22.94%	21.77%	100.00%

The above table is indicative of the fact that the working of Gramsabhas has been partially successful. (28.82%). If one observes the logical development of the table 1, 2, 3, 4 one would find that there has been consistency in emphasizing the fact that the working of the Gramsabhas have been a quite success and not a "pomp" filled success. Although much of the literature produced by the government helps to strengthen the fact that the Gram Sabhas are a great success. This study only substantiates it. This thin line of success is wrapped up with silent revolution at the ground level to support the socially emerging classes, thus bringing about the needed and intended change in the social fabric of rural India that is dominated by feudal systems. On the other hand there is a marginal difference of those who have been consistently arguing that there is a complete success story of the Gram Sabhas. This 26.47 percent believes that the Gram Sabha as discussed earlier has been able to

successfully democratize and emancipate socially arid politically the lives of the people in the village. As against those who argue of the partial success of Gramsabha, while not disagreeing on this group tend to argue that the Gramsabhas intention was not only to emancipate but to develop the village as a self sufficient unit 5. It is at this point that they believe that, the Gramsabha has failed. They also argue that the Gramsabhas have not been able to ameliorate the total interest of the village involving the infrastructure development, the minimum needs, improving the sanitary conditions and the like which are of the minimal development activities that are essentially dependent on the functioning of the Gramsabhas. They firmly and forcefully put forth their argument that the Gramsabhas have also been victimized by the politics of the caste ridden society and also the middle level ego politics, resulting in asphyxiating this delivery system. If this is one side of the story, on the other side the functionaries of Gramsabha who have a fair knowledge of politico-administrative dynamics of panchayat raj institution, believe that the poor economic factors are responsible for the partial success of the Gramsabha. Nearly 22.94 percent believe that the Gramsabha's are not successful. Incidentally most of the respondents who favoured this category are of the members of upper caste who have no direct benefit of the presence of the Gramsabhas⁴. It is understandable that they would carry such an opinion about Gramsabha given to their social disposition and it is also understandable that these people would criticize the very existence of Gramsabha. Nearly 21.77 percent have responded as 'do not know' to this question and it is difficult to assess as to why this neutral category do not want to respond to the question. Having assessed the working of Gramsabhas, a leading question was asked regarding any proposals for changing the Gramsabhas including its structure and functioning. The response given may be assessed in the table 5.

Table - 5

V. Do you suggest any Change in the working of Gramsabha?

(Yes/No)

Total no. of Respondent	Yes	No	Total
170	34	136	170
Total %	20%	80%	100%

An overwhelming 80 percent did not favour any type of change (structural or functional to the Gramsabhas) and only 20 percent wanted certain changes in Gramsabha. The augments of those who wanted changes were clearly motivated by the fact that they wanted to hold onto power as against the idea behind the

participative decision making. They also wanted to control the activities of gram panchayat through gramsabhas. They also wanted the ward level sabhas below the gramsabha to be removed and such arguments of the 20 percent respondents was only representing anti-decentralization sentiments.⁵ The majority however despite their differences favored the current disposition of gramsabhas. In order to evaluate the response of gramsabhas as an institution contributing to the development of the villages. To a straight question as to.

Table - 6

VI. Do you believe that Gramsabha can contribute to the development of the villages?

(Yes/No)

Total no. of Respondent	Yes	No	Total
170	100	70	170
Total %	58.82%	41.17%	99.99%

58.82 percent of the respondents agreed that there is development of the village through gramsabha. Many of them pointed out to the fact that the gramsabha meetings though had come down considerably there were certain schemes including IRDP that contributed to the development of people in the villages. Further they argued that the presence of gramsabha despite its limitations has positively contributed to bringing into focus many of the local problems to the attention of authorities at panchayat level. In this way the activation of gramsabha under severe limitations itself has enabled them to deliver minimum services to the cause of the communities. However the strain that the Gramsabhas are experiencing is more political in nature. If policy makers can concentrate on avoiding the political and ego clashes at the local level or if experiences can be teacher's, gramsabhas can learn better and manage its affairs on its own.

Therefore the key to success of Gramsabha is mainly dependent on participation of the community while benefits for the community may be derived if Gramsabhas are functioning effectively. In both these cases inadequate participation is affecting the process of development. In the case of the chosen areas for the study this is true.

Conclusion :

Karnataka seems to be a fertile land for experimenting the successes and the failures of panchayati raj in India. In the context of India often it is seen that the Karnataka as

having the representative character of Indianness. To some, this fertile land of experiments is also a torch bearer while the kannadigas often experience the distress and pains of panchayat raj experiments. However nothing of this distress or pain seem to be bothering the rural elite in Karnataka at least since the period of Maharajas. So long as one does not find the real will of the ruling elites to stop experimenting the panchayat raj mechanism with a hidden agenda to weaken them due to the vested interests and the ill will to share the power it is for certain, that the experiments at panchayat raj will never be complete. However despite the glory of panchayati raj under the Act of 1993 in the state of Karnataka the success of 1983 Act is something very special to recall. However in Karnataka, it is but sad to note that even on the verge of 2003, the amendment of the panchayati raj Act including the gram sabha is still loosing without gaining on concrete shape and is being subjected to one more experimentation. Having said so much about experimentation, it is but essential to discuss about the research in the area of panchayat raj too. Since the beginning of the Maharaja princely state of Mysore and its attempts to adequately demonstrate to the British that the princely state of Mysore is in tune with the British administration. The experiments in the area of panchayat raj through the governments have intact over exposed panchayat raj to the researcher's pen. There is hardly anything that the researcher has left unturned in the areas of panchayati raj thereby contributing greatly to the richness of literature on panchayati raj. Yet the current study in its own form represents on little area of panchayat raj, which has been the dream of many to realizn the Republic kind of units of administration seem to elude the attention of many.

This study therefore has made it possible to make the following findings. The findings are as follows :

- (a) The Gramsabhas, are here to stay and they are undoubtedly people's institutions;
- (b) The Gramsabhas represents sub-conscious India.
- (c) That the Gramsabhas are in need of mandating provisions in the following areas;
 - (i) To meet on a regular basis at regular interval. (Fortnightly meetings would be ideal).
 - (ii) To adequately publicize their meeting dates and notices including the agenda,
 - (iii) To identify and publicize adequately a stipulated place of meeting of Gramsabha unless otherwise required to be changed under emergency situations.

- (iv) To have a method of ensuring attendance of all the villagers including the officials, representatives of various higher level political institutions and people of the village irrespective of discrimination of any kind.
- (v) To submit under a mandate with-adequate publicity, the recommendations of GramSabha to the higher level units of administration.
- (vi) To conduct the meetings of gramsabha in a free and fair atmosphere without evading the interests of any of the caste/ religious/gender groups in the villages and finally
- (vii) There is also a need to adequately blend the presence of NGO's as buffer units between the organically established Gramsabhas and the people in order to motivate people on the one hand and the gramsabhas on the other hand.
- (d) The voluntary organizations may also be entrusted with the task of preparing the agenda of development of the villages through scientific evaluation either or in the event of lack of technical support or disinterest among the villagers in proposing or discussing the plans for the development of villages and lastly.
- (e) It is also noticed that while the functioning gramsabhas in matters relating to its contribution to the development of the villages are quite delicately established with the thin percentage of the respondents endorsing its functioning. There is a need to adequately strengthen their beliefs in gramsabhas.

If these are the findings, there are about half a dozen suggestions which we would like to place before the august readership for strengthening further the gramsabhas. They include:

- (a) Gramsabhas must invariably co-opt the nearest and available NGO's in their day to day affairs.
- (b) The village youth must be given special training through government agencies or through the experts in the universities/institutions to take active part in the gramsabhas.
- (c) The universities/institutions must be entrusted with the task of supervising gramsabhas along with the other Bureaucratic agencies to ensure and evaluate their performances naturally.
- (d) The gramsabhas must be held in the view of a camera so that best performing gramsabhas may get adequate exposure as model gramsabhas to train other gramsabhas and to reward them.

- (e) The gramsabhas may also be provided with a provision to invite the co-opted members who are VIPs, WIPS or locally prominent people in the nearest areas of the taluk so that regularity of meetings are ensured and finally.
- (f) The gramsabhas must on the basis of voters list identify the continuous absentees and debar them from the benefits that they are likely to get to discourage others from abstaining for the meeting. In this way if there is an honest and adequate research done in the areas of working of gramsabhas, it is possible that the gramsabhas will turn out to be the fruit bearers of tomorrow's democratic process.

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