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GRAMA SABHA - A MILESTONE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

The constitution 73rd Amendment Act 1992 has recognized the Grama Sabha as a statutory unit. It is defined as a body consisting of persons recognized in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayati Raj at the village level. Grama Sabha which is an entity of constitution of India is legitimized statutory body to do multifaced work at the village level. The main objective of introducing Grama Sabha is to have decentralized planning and evaluation with peoples participation at the grass root level. Constituting Grama Sabha committees to supervise the operational aspects of Gram Panchayat as one of the vital concept of decentralized administration. The observation reveals that most of the state governments are not serious towards formation of Grama Sabha committees.

Key Words: Grama Sabha, Gram Panchayat, Decentralized administration, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution (1992) is a milestone in the evolution of Panchayats in India which carved out the third tier of the Indian Political System. While the Panchayats have been the backbone of Indian villages to achieve economic development and social justice in rural areas.

Grama Sabha which is an entity of constitution of India is legitimized statutory body to do multifaced work at the village level. The main objective of introducing Grama Sabha is to have decentralized planning and evaluation with peoples participation at the grass root level.

The concept of eradication of discrimination and facilitation of peoples participation from all walks of social life in the management of affairs of their locality were the foundation for the emergence of comprehensive society called Grama Sabha. Transparency and intimacy becomes part and parcel of their institution. The realization that people's participation alone can bring sustainable development through good governance at the base level. Hence, it becomes inevitable that collective wisdom of Grama Sabha guides the Panchayati Raj Institutions in their planning and execution of developmental functions, social auditing as an integral part of Grama

Sabha that ensures transparency in administration and accountability of Panchayati Raj Institutions. In Tamil Nadu Grama Sabha is described as "A body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised with in the area of Panchayat at the village level.

Grama Sabha Act in Different States

The significance of Grama Sabha was recognized first by Maharashtra government as early as in 1959. The Bombay village Panchayat Act of 1959 provided for a minimum of two meetings of the Grama Sabha to be held in a year. It is obligatory on the part of Panchayat to place before Grama Sabha annual statement of the accounts and report of the administration of the proceeding year the development and progress of works for the ratification of Grama Sabha. The significant role that Grama Sabha could play in Maharashtra can be understood from the fact that Maharashtra land reforms review committee recognized it even in the vital matters like complementation of tenancy acts. It is a paradoxical truth that in several neighbouring states of Maharashtra. The Grama Sabha is emerging as a vibrant body of decentralized administration.

In fact the Karnataka act No.20 of 1958 passed by the erstwhile Janata government introduced the body called Grama Sabha an important competent of decentralized administration without mentioning about the specific functions of Grama Sabha. However, Diwaker Committee (1963) had brought to light the difficulty caused by Grama Sabha as it does not have any constitutional rights to control the functioning of Panchayats at the grass root level.

The Karnataka Act reveals that Grama Sabha was expected to prepare and promote more development schemes for the rural development. But in reality there is no evidence to show that the Grama Sabha had performed the function. There is no substantial evidence to show that Grama Sabha had mobilized voluntary labour and contribution in kind and cash for Community Welfare Schemes.

Functions of Grama Sabha

Grama Sabha is the basic foundation of the grass root level democratic institution and constitutionary mandated body would perform following 12 functions.

1. To examine annual statements of accounts, audit report, audit note and to seek

clarification from the Panchayat.

2. To discuss report on the administration of the preceding year.
3. To review programme for the year, any new programme and review all kinds of works under taken by the Gram Panchayat.
4. To consider proposals for fresh taxation or for enhancement of existing taxation.
5. To approve the selection of schemes, beneficiaries location, identification and implementation of various development programmes.
6. To mobilize voluntary labour and contribution of kind and cash.
7. To undertake programmes for adult education and family welfare with in the village.
8. To promote unity and harmony among all the sections of the rural community.
9. To seek clarifications from the Mukhia and members of the Grama Panchayat about schemes, income and expenditure.
10. To consider the budget prepared by the Gram Panchayat and future development programmes and plans.
11. To maintain a complete register for all development works undertaken by Gram Panchayat or any other department.
12. To approve village plan of action.

However, here is no unanimity among the states in implementing the function devolved. Most of the states are not serious in implementing the functions to achieve sustainable economic development in the villages. The constitutional right empowered to Gram Sabha has miserably failed in bringing transformation among the rural poor. The grave reality is that in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Uttaranchal villages are not aware of the meetings of Grama Sabha and its functions. Most of the Panchayats have failed to execute the decisions taken of the Grama Sabha. However the recent experience reveals that there is a growing awareness among the rural people about the significance of Grama Sabha functions. For example the states like Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Sikkim have successfully implementing the decisions of Grama Sabha while in Assam, West Bengal, Uttara Pradesh the functions of Grama Sabha are only confined to ratification of budget and audit report, review programme of the work undertaken by the

Panchayats and seeking clarification from the Mukhia about the schemes income and expenditure.

Grama Sabha Meetings – A Myth

One of the most important recommendations made by the 73rd Constitution Amendment that the Grama Panchayat should invariably conduct Grama Sabha meetings regularly and elicit the opinion of the voters about the priority of development works and in turn implement them to achieve sustainable development.

It is unfortunate that a majority of state governments could not show any seriousness and have failed to conduct Grama Sabha meetings which is mandatory. Unless the people of the village participate and ventilate their opinion in a democratic way Panchayatari Raj Institutions cannot be strengthened.

The operational functions reveals that there is a diversity in the operationalisation of the concept of Grama Sabha in different states. The Table-II indicates that in states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal only two meetings held annually. But in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chandigarh, Goa, Kerala, Orissa and Tamil Nadu the functions of Grama Sabha is much better with four to six meetings held in a year. It is a paradoxical truth that Madhya Pradesh government has paved the way for the better governance at the grass root level by conducting 16 meetings held annually. By observing the Grama Sabha meetings and its performance, it may be difficult to arrive at a conclusion that, how Grama Sabha is operationalised are important factor that has evolved is the decision of the Grama Sabha has become mandatory over the Grama Panchayats. This has ultimately paved the way for the practice of good governance at the grass roots and where the concept of economic development and social justice have become the core of all operations.

However, the collective wisdom of Grama Sabha guides the Panchayat Raj Institutions in their planning and execution of developmental functions. Social auditing is an integral part of Grama Sabha which ensures transparency in administration. However, the Tamil Nadu government issued instructions to conduct Grama Sabha on 26th January, 15th August, 1st May and 2nd October without fail.

Grama Sabha Committees

Constituting Grama Sabha committees to supervise the operational aspects of Gram Panchayat as one of the vital concept of decentralized administration. The observation reveals that most of the state governments are not serious towards formation of Grama Sabha committees. Few states like Bihar, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Rajasthan and Tripura have formulated vigilance committees to ensure transparency at the grass root democracy. Though Grama Sabha is empowered to participate in decision making process of the Panchayat meetings, none of the state government formulated Grama Sabha with development committees at the village level. In order to ensure sustainable development of each individual citizen in the village. Hence, it is necessary to formulate following 18 committees for the total transformation of the Panchayat administration in rural India.

Grama Sabha Needs Legal Knowledge

In a vast country like India Grama Sabha needs basic legal knowledge to educate the local people on Panchayati raj administration in general and Gram Panchayat in particular. Grama Sabha becomes alive to the legal issues and develop legal knowledge with the help of constant “Legal Literacy Campaign(LLC)” to attain maturity with greater sustainability of development initiatives

In recent times efforts are made to create legal awareness among the rural people, the Madhya Pradesh government launched a novel method of spreading legal knowledge to the village habitants including SC & STs of the Scheduled Tribes Act2006 which empowers Grama Sabha on Information Act. A small booklet in tribal dialects published and distributed in all the tribal areas in Madhya Pradesh. Added to this innovative audio materials on the provisions of the act were developed and distributed among 8000 tribal villages to create awareness about functions and responsibilities of Grama Sabha. The right to information act has made specific provisions on National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Panchayati Raj guidelines, Food Security, Forest Environment Act, Child Labour Eradication Act, Employment of Rural Women and Controlling Social Evils in rural society. The Right to Information Act (2005) is a bold step towards creating transparent system of governance through Grama Sabha.

The constitution of India has provided Grama Sabha a body consisting of voters of Panchayat to which Gram Panchayat is accountable and answerable. The body being a forum of village level planning and a venue of social audit has a crucial role to play in developing rural infrastructure.

Need for Effective Peoples Participation

The goal of inclusive growth as envisaged by the government cannot be achieved without the effective participation of local people and the Panchayati Raj Institutions and these institutions should be considered as an integral part of the governance of the country. In this context several suggestions are made by the experts and voluntary organizations towards effective peoples participation.

1. Grama Panchayat should be made responsible to conduct Grama Sabha meetings twice in a year under the direct supervision of Mandal Development officials and the Revenue officials.
2. The exact date of conducting Grama Sabha can be left to the discretion of the village Panchayat and its members.
3. Beneficiaries of various schemes should be identified and approved only in the Grama Sabha meetings. All the benefits of various schemes should be distributed in the Grama Sabha only, so that benefits would go to right persons only.
4. Information regarding all government activities in connection with the village Panchayat should take place through Grama Sabha. This would create interest among the people to participate in the meetings.
5. A film show explaining the public policies and programmes under taken by the government in the field of Agriculture, Rural Health, Education Minimum Needs Programme, Right to Information, Drinking Water to all the local public, Public Distribution System would attract the people towards Grama Sabha meetings.
6. A collective participation of the villagers along with Grama Panchayat ward members would go a long way in solving the developmental issues in the village in turn this would help in achieving integrated development in the village Panchayat.
7. Print and electronic Media should play an important role in providing adequate

information about the growing importance of Grama Sabha and create social awareness among the people.

8. The salient features of Grama Sabha and the various activities to be constituted during Grama Sabha meetings and agenda has to be informed to the villagers well in advance.
9. Ward members/public representatives must disseminate the information about the Gram Panchayat function to the local people in their respective wards and they should motivate them to participate in the Grama Sabha.
10. Ward wise Grama Sabha would enable every voter to participate in the deliberations. The village Mukhia and ward member should apprise the ward people about the government programmes sanctioned to the village.

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