

People's Participation in Panchayatiraj of Rural Assam: With Special Reference to Darrang District

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Abstract:

Participation of people is a fundamental aspect of democratic success. It builds an autonomous and cooperative human spirit. To promote efficient involvement of the people in the rural government process, Indian states have established the notion of democratic decentralisation via the Panchayati Raj institution. The adoption of the 73rd Amendment Act was a milestone in guaranteeing the effective involvement of people through Goan Sabha's institution in all rural governance issues. In this backdrop, the current study attempted to analyse the degree of the involvement of Gaon Sabha in the district of Darrang of Assam. Four development blocks were selected by the Simple Random Sampling approach for the study and thirty-three GPs total from these selected blocks were picked by the same method. In addition, 165 interviewees were interviewed from these selected GPs. The data shows that there are extremely few participants in the GS conference in Darrang. In short, the state of GS is exceedingly awful throughout the district. The GSs must first be functioning in real spirit to reform the system.

Keywords: Local politics, Civil society, People's participation, Gaon sabha.

Introduction:

Participation of people is a fundamental aspect for democratic success. This is how people are able to manage their own businesses. Active and organised participation can only be feasible if there are chances for decision-making for people from all areas of society. The real purpose of participation is to enhance human skills and inspire people to quickly identify and address their problems and accept all life-sphere obstacles [1]. It builds an autonomous and cooperative human spirit. Only with the active participation of the people can any development plan and activity succeed, and this is feasible if political authority is decentralised. In this regard, the Indian states established in the form of democratic decentralisation the idea of decentralised governance, with the participation, including poor and marginalised in decision-making bodies.

The Panchayati Raj institutions realise the concept of democracy at the rural level [2]. The population of the villages is a self-governing body. Its principal objective is to include people at the grassroots level in decision-making process. As the fact that the central authority in a country like India alone cannot fulfil the needs and needs of all people living in different parts of the country is widely understood, it is therefore vital to decentralise political and economic forces. Only through establishing the local government in the shape of the Panchayati Raj system will this be feasible. It has developed a fundamental unit of people's social and financial lives and serves as an effective tool for organising people at the village level. It can promote the local population's socio-economic development and provide the development of backward areas with rural infrastructure [8]. It introduces a structure in which local authorities are accountable to the public for government actions. It also covers disadvantaged and marginalised groups and enables them to access every area. It also covers the mainstream. They strive towards rural development, involving all sectors of the people, regardless of caste, class, religion, gender and so on, with an active agreement. The success of Panchayati Raj Institution is well appreciated not only by the local development but also by the greater participation of people in planning and development [7]. The passage of the Seventy Third Amendment Act was a milestone in ensuring that the Goan Sabha institution guaranteed effective participation of people in rural development efforts.. It is recognised as an organisation that gives people the opportunity to participate in planning and carrying out all development initiatives in the town. It provides a platform for the marginalised sectors such as SCs, ST's and women to be directly involved in the rural government process [3]. Therefore, this study tried to analyse the level of people's participation in Goan Sabha in the district of Darrang, Assam (in Assam it is called Gaon Sabha).

Methodology:

The current study is limited to the district of Darrang of Assam.. To perform the study four development blocks were first selected based on simple random sampling, namely Sipajhar, Pub- Mangaldai, Kalai gaon, and Bechimari. Thirty-

three (33) Goan Panchayats were chosen from the designated blocks using the Simple Random Sampling method. Finally, five Gaon Sabha (GS) members were selected as interviewees from each designated Goan Panchayats (GPs). A total of 165 interviewees were therefore interviewed.

An open interview schedule has been devised to acquire information from interviewees. Moreover, numerous GS meetings were held in order to comprehend the reality of the ground. Secondary sources like books, newspapers, periodicals, research articles and Internet contents were also used in addition to primary data. Finally, the data acquired were categorised, collated and evaluated, and a conclusion was reached appropriately.

Result and Discussion:

Respondents	Darrang			
	Attending			Total
	Yes	No	No response	
Male	35	68	1	104
Female	22	20	19	61
Total	57(34.5%)	88(53.3 %)	20(12.2%)	165(100%)

Table 1: Extent of the people’s participation in the GS

The table above underlines the degree of people’s engagement in GS’ meetings in the Darrang district. The following table reveals that 53.3% of respondents do not attend the GS meeting, while only 34.5% believe they are attending that meeting. A considerably smaller number of persons attends the GS meeting. This is because no regular GS Meeting takes place. The only way to retain official formality is during the selection of beneficiaries such gatherings. In addition, GS meetings are not held on other development problems except for the selection of beneficiaries. To comprehend the case of respondents who did not participate, who replied in the negative, they are asked further and are given their answers below (Table 1).

Respondents	Darrang			
	Consideration of GS decision at GP Meeting			Total
	Yes	No	Don’t know	
Male	32	42	22	96
Female	19	16	34	69
Total	51(30.9%)	58(35.15 %)	56(33.93%)	165(100%)

Table 2: Compliance with GS's GP decision

In terms of compliance with GS meetings resolution by the GPs it is obvious from the table above that 30.9% of respondents males of Darrang feel that GPs are compliant with GS meetings decisions while 33.93% feel that GPs are incompliant with GS meetings resolution. Therefore, it is noted that the GP does not approve choices taken during the GS meeting in most cases (Table 2).

Respondents	Darrang			
	Express of opinion			Total
	Yes	No	No response	
Male	31	46	22	99
Female	20	16	30	66
Total	51(30.9%)	62(37.57 %)	52(31.51%)	165(100%)

Table 3: Extent to which attendees at the GS meeting express their views

Table 3 emphasises that 30.9% of respondents within the district believe that they can express their ideas at GS meetings, whereas 37.57% answered negatively. In addition, during the interaction, a good number of respondents, i.e. 31.51% did not give any opinion. The respondents also indicated that individuals in the villages are mostly not permitted to speak or comment on any GS meeting issues. All the choices are made on their own by sole members of GPs.

As far as recipients under different government schemes are concerned, the table above shows that the recipients are not selected consistently. 64.2% of respondents have said that recipients had been already selected and formally accepted at the GS meetings. It also appears that 23% of respondents noted that a GS list is prepared, followed by 7.3% who saw the list selected by the government, while the remaining 5.4% said that a list of beneficiaries is prepared according to instructions of the party. The GS list is compiled accordingly. The study notes that the names are selected previously before the GS meetings and then discussed and approved during the GS meetings of beneficiaries under several government-sponsored programmes (Figure 1).

Findings from Goan Sabha meetings:

The survey notes that less individuals attend the GS meeting in Darrang district. It is because the meetings of GS are not held for a certain amount of time. These sessions are conducted only during the selection of recipients under different government initiatives. Because we know well that in rural regions it is necessary to get accepted by people through the GS meetings for the implementation of any development scheme and only hence do these meetings have to be organised just to maintain official formality. While the Panchayati Raj Act provides that the GS meetings should be held four times a year, it is discovered that such provisions about the convening of the GS meetings in Darrang in practise are scarcely being followed. However, the absence of information regarding the GS meeting and the professional involvement also leads to minimum people’s participation in the GS meetings. The survey also shows that members are unable to discuss or express their views on any matter relating to local development in most cases. Only GP members make the decisions themselves without consulting GS members. They take all decisions on their own. The opinions of the people at the meetings are not duly taken into account.

The analysis also shows that there is no systemic method in the district for selecting recipients under various governmental initiatives. The names of recipients who are close to them for some governmental schemes are selected exclusively in conjunction with some influential localities, earlier than the GS meeting and afterwards, only accepted in that meeting to maintain the formality. Furthermore, on the execution of decisions are taken at the GS meeting. The GS rulings have rarely been implemented in most cases by the GPs in Darrang. In addition, it has been stated that many people are normally deprived of the government’s benefits. The sole reason why benefits do not reach the rightful sectors of society is the existence of corruption. In most cases, the presidents, secretaries and other elected officials of GPs designate family members as beneficiaries. Furthermore, it can be noted that a wide variety of functions in most of the Darrang GPs, such as the audit report, annual audits, preparations of different local development plans, are not discussed at the GS meetings. The localities of GS are apathetic to participate in the GS meetings due to this ineffective and incompetent functioning of practically all Darrang GPs.

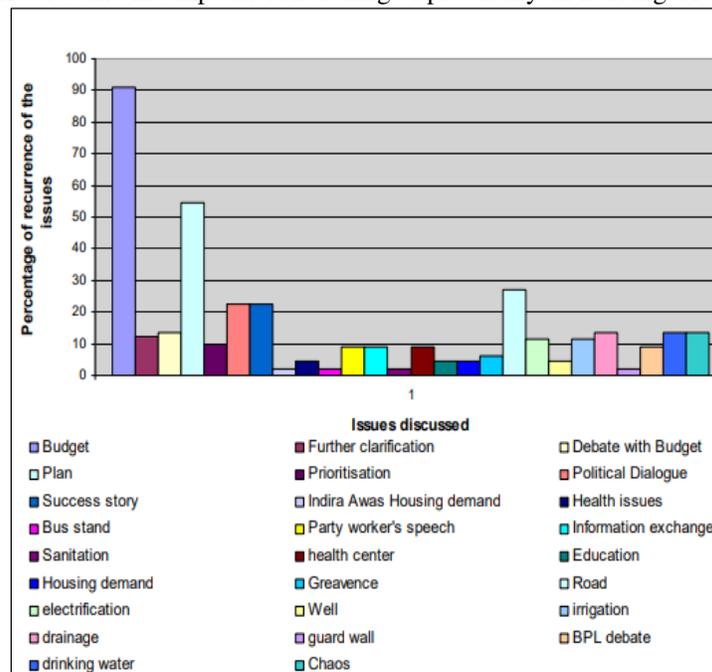


Figure 1. Frequency of issues covered by Goan Sabha

An overview of the Panchayati Raj System in Assam:

Gaon Panchayat (GP):

Gaon Panchayat is the grassroots democratic institution. The historic 73rd amendment of Indian constitution were re-established, re-organized the local Self Government by a new institutional framework provided for the establishment of the Gaon Panchayat at the village level. The Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1994 passed by Assam Legislative Assembly gives the opportunity to the people of Assam for an active and sound participation in policy formulation and implementation process through Gram Sabha. Currently there are seventy-five actively working Gaon Panchayats in Darrang District .

Anchalik Panchayat (AP):

(1) For every development block, there must be aanchalik panchayat which is within the competence of a city committee and included in a city/municipality, a sanitary or a cantonment area, or a notified area, except in accordance with the provisions of Assam Panchayat Act, 1994, for the entire development block jurisdiction.

(2) Any Anchalik Panchayat shall be an organisation under the name Anchalik Panchayat, bear perpetual estate and bear a common seal and be granted the power of suing in its company, or of acquiring, holding, transferring or immovable or moving properties that are either disposed of in or out of it or in its company, subject to any restrictions imposed by, under, or under, this or any other Act. Currently there are six APs actively working in Darrang.

Anchalik Panchayat's general functions:

The General function of the Anchalik Panchayats shall be-

(a) Preparing and submitting to the Zilla Parishad, within the necessary time for inclusion in the District Plan, the annual projects entrusted to it by the Act, and the schemes entrusted to it by the Government or Zilla Parishad;

(b) The annual plans of all Gaon Panchayat are being built and consolidated under the Anchalik Panchayat Plan. The consolidated plan is submitted to the Zilla Parishad;

(c) Annual Budget preparation of the Anchalik Panchayat Plan is being prepared and approved by Zilla Parishad within the time specified;

(d) the performance and implementation of such functions as the government or Zilla Parishad might entrust to it;

(e) help the Government in natural disaster assistance operations;

Zilla Parishad:

Zilla Parishad is the third tier of Panchayati Raj in Assam. As a unit of Rural Local Self Government, it operates at the district level. Under the Assam Panchayat Act 1994, Zilla Parishad have been retained. The Mahkuma Parishads have given place to Zilla Parishads, and in this way Assam now strictly follows the 3-tier pattern of Panchayati Raj. Currently there are 7 Zilla Parishad constituencies working actively in Darrang.

Impacts on programmers:

The development of the CIS represents a first step in the continuation of existing schemes and in the initiation of new ones. Some political opponents, for example, obstruct land access necessary to create jobs under the recent rural employment guarantee programmers [9]. Another example was the destructive stance taken by opponents who had saplings disarming and the protective fencing surrounding the plants that had seriously impacted their social forestry operation. Alternatively, roughly twice as many workers as necessary had worked on a project for rural employment since their respective supporters were sent from the main and opposition factions inside the GUS.

Core findings from the two contexts:

The investigation exposes several local problems that represent two wider domains: firstly, the unintentional politicization of democratic space; and the passiveness of people. These key challenges, their dimensions and their impact on local authorities are discussed in the following sections.

• **Democratic space unintended policymaking:**

The key question relating to the failure of the GoanSabhAs and the PRIs participatory agendas is unintentional politicisation. The Goan Sabha meetings set and promote political agendas through lectures. Politicisation begins in the case of the PRIs, as it is seen to be an environment for political control. In both cases, informal party political activities have corrupted the formal mechanism. Naturally, the political decision-making process is crucial and might play a beneficial role provided large-scale involvement is ensured – the Panchayat System’s initial aim [5]. However, the weak participation rate and the challenges with establishing the CIS in GoanSabhAs reveal an adverse political environment in the villages. The concern of people being politically labelled because of the open voting method is an important factor. Three widespread and fair involvement in planning, execution and development

programmers are hindered and disengaged from policy and decision-making. The scenario causes issues. The situation creates three ways: This provides opportunistic and corrupt behaviours, as political parties lose responsibility to the ordinary people.

Although the Goan Sabah and the PRIs are both politicising concerns, the degree to which people are affected is different. The procedure is the main concern identified for Goan Sabha meetings, and their “simply” worth is diminished. Conflicts around PRIs, on the other hand, show an organised attempt by political parties reflective of increased authority. This forces people to participate in the open voting system to support one of the two panels, as the parties have “numbers” in these settings. Goan Sabha does not provide the political party with such incentives, and citizens are not put under much pressure even when there is significant political interference. These different instances illustrate that “manage benefits” are the primary political motivator. People have no choice but to choose options ‘organised’ by the various parties.

- **People’s passiveness:**

In both instances political interaction in democratic space is seen. But, although it is not in their best interests, people are often found inactive and distant. Why are humans passive? It is mostly due to collective mobilisation failure. A scenario in which “facts” are clearly in favour of or against to a certain course of action. Here the argument of Georg Lukács is worth noting: ‘The circumstance has never happened, nor can or will ‘facts’ speak plainly for or against any certain course of action.’

So, until a serious attempt to organise the people against their passiveness is launched, there is little opportunity for change.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the condition of GS is exceedingly unpleasant outside the district. It does not work well for which it has been designed. People’s participation is not adequate in this body. The GSs must first be made operational in the spirit to renovate the local institutions in the district, especially the state in general. The GS Meeting is proposed in accordance with the provisions of the Panchayat Act of Assam, and the district administration must take care of it. In terms of the GS meeting, wide publicity throughout the GP is also needed. It is also recommended that the Act be ratified to include the establishment of Ward Sabhas because it will give people more space to participate directly in rural local self-administration matters. This would further enhance the recipients’ selection process, as the Ward Sabhas compile this list itself, and hence the GS draws up a final list at its meetings. In addition, awareness efforts must be conducted at level Ward to encourage people, particularly women, to participate in meetings to promote growth. The participation of the participants at the GS meeting will enhance significantly if these steps are taken.

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