

Rural development through people's participation in Gram Sabha: A study from Central India

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Suggested Citation:

Rana, U. & Sagarika, S. (2023). Rural development through people's participation in Gram Sabha: A study from Central India. *Global Journal of Sociology: Current Issues*. 13(2), 75-83. <https://doi.org/10.18844/gjs.v13i2.9112>

Received from June 7, 2023; revised from August 17, 2023; accepted from October 12, 2023

Selection and peer review under the responsibility of Prof. Dr. Carlos Rodrigues, Universidade Fernando Pessoa, Portugal.

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Abstract

Rural development can never be possible without a robust implementation of governmental policies in rural regions. The Panchayati Raj institutions were introduced in India in 1993 with the goal of rural development through the people's participation. In this context, this study explores the level of involvement of villagers in Gram Sabha and their awareness of state development policies and investigates gender participation in rural development. The study adopts both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The data have been collected from the village Chitoura, Sagar, district of Madhya Pradesh (MP) via semi-structured interview methods, case studies, and observations. A total of 50 villagers were selected as respondents through random sampling. Notably, the findings point out that the Panchayati Raj institutions are failing to deliver the development policies on the ground due to a lack of awareness among the villagers and poor participation of women in village activities. This study recorded that caste and gender hinder rural development as some specific castes gained more benefits from the Panchayati Raj institution.

Keywords: Gram sabha; Panchayati Raj institution; rural development; women representatives.

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1. Introduction

The active participation of individuals is pivotal for the successful accomplishment of rural development programs by local self-governance in a democracy. This requires the collaboration and participation of individuals at each level of governance, in line with the fundamental democratic principle of "by the people, of the people, and for the people." In India, where the rural population constitutes two-thirds of the entire population, the involvement and participation of rural citizens is particularly crucial for effective governance.

The Indian government has adopted a bottom-up approach to governance, with the village panchayat serving as the primary unit of governance in rural regions. This approach is supported by the 73rd constitutional amendment, which establishes a three-tiered architecture for rural local self-governance, comprising the gram panchayat at the village level, the panchayat samiti or taluk panchayat at the block level, and the zila parishad or zila panchayat at the district level. The gram sabha, in particular, serves as a forum for ordinary citizens to express their needs and wishes, regardless of class, caste, gender, or political affiliation.

The gram sabha plays a vital role in enabling each voter in the village to be involved in decision-making for local developments. It prepares a political platform for people to discuss their common problems, and in doing so, helps to identify the requirements and goals of the community. Additionally, the gram sabha provides a platform for citizens to come together for debate, discuss, and analyze the plans to administrative actions of their representatives. This transparency and accountability are essential for the effective functioning of the village panchayat and the fulfillment of the goals of rural development programs.

Strengthening the institution of the gram sabha is critical to bridging the gap between the desired and actual impact of government programs. Local self-governing institutions play a crucial role in the development of a nation and the promotion of people's participation in the democratic process (Abiddin, Ibrahim & Abdul Aziz, 2022; Clark, 2022). They are essential components of grassroots democracy and provide individuals with a sense of accountability and a deeper understanding of democratic principles. The success of small units of government encourages public involvement in various developmental projects, fostering a unique opportunity for individuals to participate in public affairs.

Despite the constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj and the implementation of various development schemes, rural development in India has yet to achieve the desired level of success. To address this challenge, it is essential to increase the active and participatory involvement of rural citizens in the development process. The Gram Sabha has been given legal status through the Constitution's 73rd Amendment Act, and this study aims to examine the issue of people's participation in rural development programs through the Gram Sabha. We will also explore the awareness level of villagers about rural development programs and examine the active participation of individuals in rural development.

1.1. Literature review

The idea of Panchayats in India is viewed from two perspectives: the instrumentalist perspective, which regards them as development tools, and the institutional perspective, which views them as institutions of self-government. Even though Article 40 of the Indian Constitution embodies a concept of Panchayats as units of self-government. However, it was discussed in the discourse on decentralization when the L.M. Singhvi committee emphasized the institutional perspective in 1989. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution aimed to combine both perspectives.

Numerous scholars have studied the relationship between Panchayat Raj and overall village development. Thanikasalam and Saraswathy (2014) found that the execution of rural development plans through Panchayat Raj institutions significantly impacted the socioeconomic circumstances of the people in the selected areas. Still, some beneficiaries experienced asset losses, while impoverished people have yet to be covered under such schemes for a better life.

RanjithKumar (2014) interviewed 237 respondents from Village Panchayat to assess the level of their participation and found that while the Gram Sabha was an aid for village Panchayat to bring local people's participation in local governance, it had failed to achieve this goal. Kumar et al., (2013) helped to understand

the notion of local self-governance and its historical background in India, while Reddy (2014) interviewed 270 residents of Anantpura District to explore people's awareness of rural development programs and found that the majority of respondents found rural development schemes beneficial.

1.2. Purpose of study

Rashid and Sen (2010) argued that the active participation of villagers in Gram Sabha is low due to poor literacy rates and lack of awareness. There is a gap in the literature regarding people's opinions on the role of village Panchayat, particularly in the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh, which is located in a very backward region of Bundelkhand and has a low literacy rate. An empirical study is required to investigate the impact of people's participation in Gram Sabha on rural development. The objective of this study was to explore the level of native participation in the panchayat system through Gram Sabha.

- To understand the level of awareness of villagers about rural development programs.
- To identify and evaluate the role of gender in participation and rural development

The hypothesis for the study is outlined below

- Active participation of villagers through Gram Sabha ensures rural development.
- If the level of awareness is high among the locals, then rural development is increased.
- Gender plays an important role in participation

2. Method and Materials

The study's methodology was designed to gather information and draw conclusions about the development and the role of native's participation in the village Chitoura in Sagar district, Madhya Pradesh, India. The primary and secondary data were collected, with the secondary data obtained from official records related to various programs. To achieve the study's objectives, both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were used, including semi-structured interviews, case studies, and observations.

2.1. Participants

The research took place in Chitoura village, which is situated in Sagar district in Madhya Pradesh, India. The village is located 18 km from Sagar, which serves as both the district and sub-district headquarters of the selected village. The total geographical area of the village is 916.1 hectares, with about 602 houses, according to government data. However, the Sarpanch informed the researchers that 12% of houses have increased. The total population of the village is 2752, with the male population being 1479 and the female population being 1273 (as per the Sarpanch's data). The literacy rate of the village is 65.88%, with 77.48% of males and 52.40% of females being literate. Migration has been increasing daily towards urban areas for sustainable livelihood and education for the new generations. The village is near Sagar city, and people regularly visit the urban areas for their day-to-day needs and employment. It has a single panchayat with 19 wards, headed by a female Sarpanch and consisting of 19 members, 10 of whom are women. The study used random sampling to select a sample size of 50 people.

2.2. Data collection tools

The interview guide was prepared based on the study's objectives. In addition to the interviews, the investigator also collected data through case studies and observations.

2.3. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using appropriate statistical and qualitative analysis techniques.

3. Results

Table 1
Profile of Respondent

Socio-demographic variables		N=50	Percent
Sex of Respondents	Male	25	50%
	Female	25	50%
Caste of Respondents	SC	20 (11 male & 09 female)	40%
	OBC	16 (07 male & 09 female)	32%
	General	14 (07 male & 07 female)	28%
Age Group of Respondent	18-25	12	24%
	26-35	09	18%
	36-45	14	28%
	45-above	15	30%
Education of Respondents	Illiterate	25 (09 male & 16 female)	50%
	Primary School	10 (07 male & 02 female)	20%
	Middle School	07 (05 male & 03 female)	14%
	High School	05 (02 male & 03 female)	10%
	Intermediate or above	03 (02 male & 01female)	06%
Income of Respondents' families (per month in INR)	2000- 5000	29	58%
	5000-10000	09	18%
	10000-above	12	24%
Religion of Respondent	Hindu	48	96%
	Others	02	04%
Family Structure of Respondent	Nuclear family	42	84%
	Joint family	08	16%
Marital status of Respondent	Unmarried	05	10%
	Married	44	88%
	Widow	01	02%

* The abbreviations meaning Schedule Caste (SC), Other Backward Class (OBC), and General.

*As per constituency, there is a female (SC) seat reserved for Sarpanch and other ward members.

Table 1 displays the profile of the respondent

Decentralization is considered a democratic reform in India. There Panchayati Raj Institute has been seen as hope in the way of decentralizing power in local representation. The Gram Sabha has been seen as another hope in this way. But woefully, it could not become a vigorous and significant institution at the fundamental stage. Although it cannot claim that nothing has changed on this path, the change could not approach the expectations of more than two decades of implementation. There are the following hurdles pointed out in this journey.

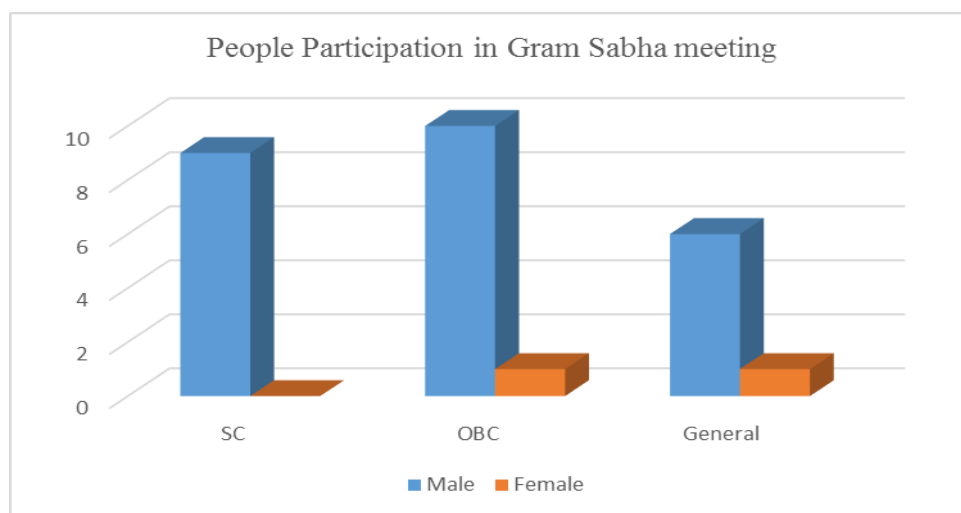
Indian social structure cannot be understood without including caste. Caste plays a vital role in determining all aspects of the individual and community's social, political, and economic status. In the village of Chitoura, the highest percent population belongs to the OBC category, and the second proportion belongs to the general caste, while the low ratio of schedule caste. However, as random sampling, we found the highest number of respondents from the schedule caste, but interviews with respondents revealed that their sarpanch belongs to the schedule caste. Still, the upper castes (general and OBC) are dominated in the village. Moreover, the candidate who gets supported by the upper and dominant caste (A caste that holds both numerical superiority over other castes and significant economic and political power is commonly referred to as a dominant caste. The likelihood of a caste group achieving dominance increases when its position within the local caste hierarchy is relatively high) wins the election. Respondents from the SC category shared that “ab to hum chunav me khade bhi ho sakte he, pehle to koi humare yaha se chunav me aane ke ware me soch bhi nahi sakta tha”. Now we (respondents from scheduled caste) can be candidates in the election, earlier no one from us could even think of being a candidate. They also share that, upper-caste people also create hurdles during the execution of policy implementation.

In this continuity, this study explores the status of Gram Sabha. It is the powerful foundation of

decentralized governance, but unfortunately, it could not become a vibrant and foremost institution at the local level due to several challenges. Gram Sabhas were mainly captured by sarpanches and other small groups, including caste and gender (Singh, 2002). Respondents share (Fig. 1) that “gram sabha me jane se hota kya he, hota to wahi he jo wo log chahte hai” what happens by participating in the Gram Sabha’s meetings, happens what those people want. They shared upper caste domination during Gram Sabha meetings. The authorities give the issue raised by the Sarpanch and his supporters more importance.

Other respondents mentioned that Gram Sabha’s meetings were conducted on the papers only, or if conducted, many of us did not get accurate information. Some people said that many times we requested to sarpanch but he/she never listen to our problem just because we stopped to participate in Panchayat raj activities. It means the panchayat system is working slowly, and most villagers are not happy with the system. The state’s objective indicates that the Gram Sabhas are entrusted with powers and duties, but in reality, experience draws a picture of disappointment. This village is the witness to poor participation by members.

Figure 1
Participants

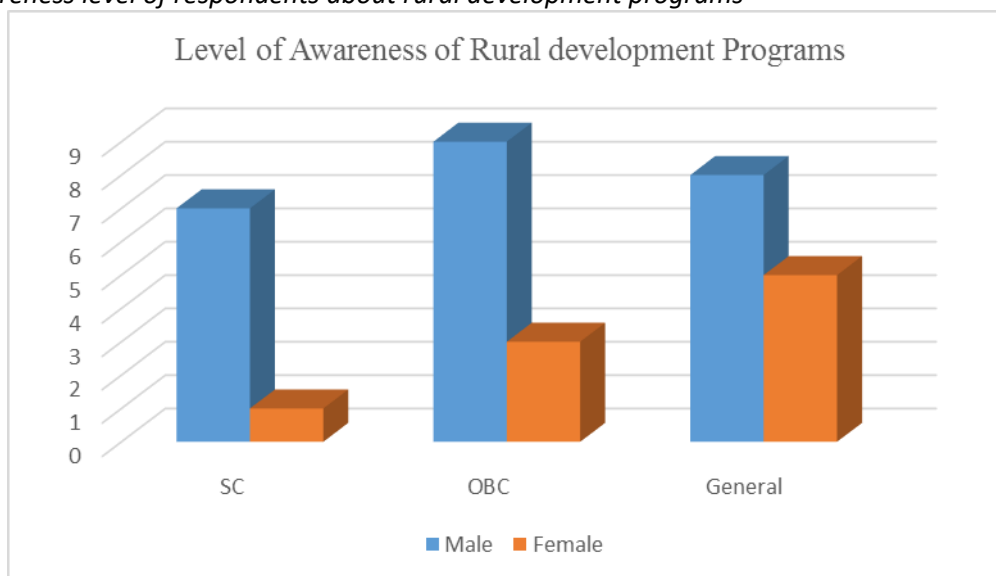


In Figure 1, 18 % SC male, 20 % OBC male, and 2% female while 12 % of general males and 2 % of females are participating in gram sabha. A significant part of females is not participating in gram sabha, and although the sarpanch of the village is a woman, she never participates in panchayat activities. The two women who attended the panchayat program are the village's daughters, so they used to visit panchayats sometimes. In contrast, daughters-in-law and other married women never visit the panchayat, even after being the representative.

The level of villagers' awareness about village development programs and their appropriate implications decides the way of rural development. Awareness can be availed through education and participation in the activities. The literacy rate of the village is 65.88%, of which 77.48% are male and 52.40 % of female. The difference in illiteracy can also be seen based on caste. Although literacy can help to achieve the goal of development and decentralization, this village has not achieved its goal, the structural issues of caste and gender are hampering development. The data (Figs. 2, 3, and 4) shows the lack of women's participation in all activities and less awareness about development schemes.

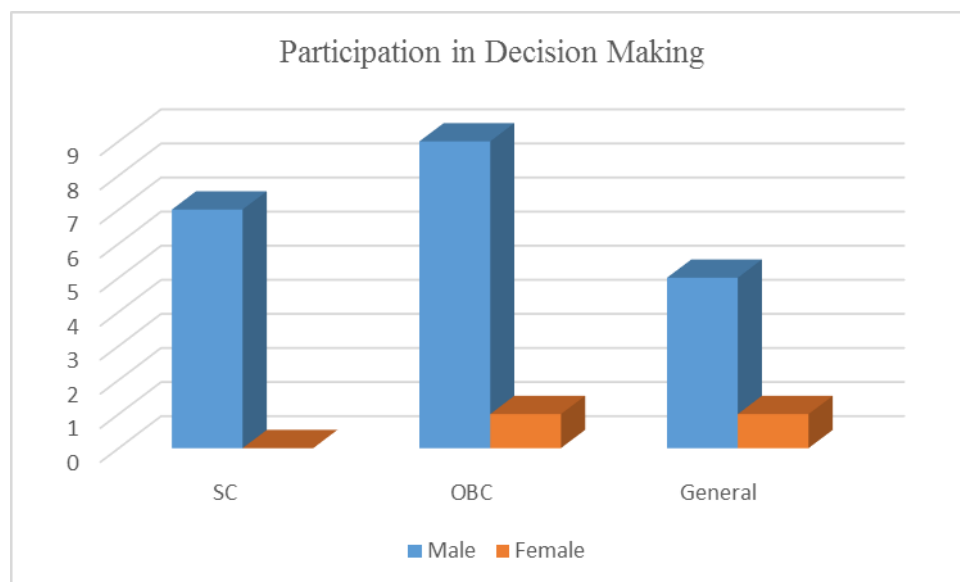
Moreover, those who are aware are getting benefits from the system, but those not aware are not getting any benefits. They have neither job cards nor shochalaya (Toilet). Those who are aware have received government house (Kuti) and benefits of other schemas like Ladli Lakhmi yojana, old age pension, etc. The important fact is unaware people are poor, their livelihood source is bidi (a type of Indian cigarette) making and daily labor. The school and Anganwadi are working properly way no one complains in the village (Setty, 1985).

Figure 2
Awareness level of respondents about rural development programs



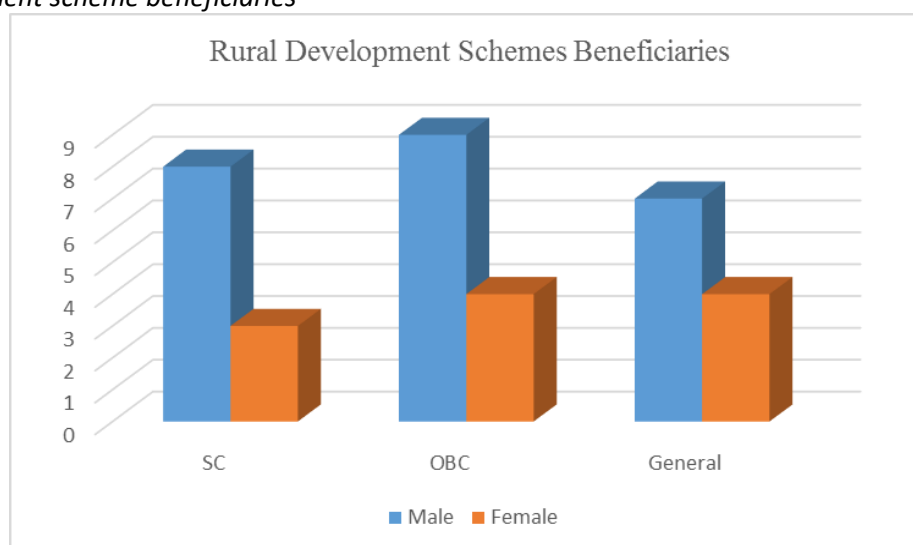
From Figure 2, in the awareness level of respondents about rural development programs, we found that the general category male was 16%, 10% OBC male was 18% and female 6 %, and the SC category was 14% male and 2% female were aware of the rural development program. In detail, female respondents were only aware of the benefits of schemes, and they were not aware of how to get benefits.

Figure 3
Participation in Grama Sabha's decision-making



In Figure 3, there is 14% of SC males, 18 % of OBC males, 2 % of females 10 % of general males, and 2% of females are participating in Grama Sabha's decision-making. But they narrate that those decisions have been taken in gram sabha not always implemented.

Figure 4
Rural development scheme beneficiaries



From Figure 4, 18% of males and 8% of females in the OBC category are beneficiaries, 16% of males and 6% of the females of SC are getting benefits, and 14% of males and 6% of general categories females are receiving the benefits. But other remaining people are not receiving any benefit from the panchayat.

4. Discussion

Reservation policy can be seen as a means to fortify women's empowerment to enhance awareness of decision-making, self-confidence, leadership, and involvement in the development and social issues of the region (Singh et al., 2022; Rana, 2021; Prior & Heinämäki, 2017; Kumar & Pandey, 2023). In this context, many state governments have increased the proportion of reservations up to 50% of women representatives in Local Governance. Several Indian states, including Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal, have increased their reservation quotas for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to 50% or more. For instance, in Karnataka, more than 50% of the PRI representatives are women. This step is shown as a milestone in women's emancipation within the patriarchal society, but ground reality has shown disappointment in the expected change of active participation in PRI. This can be seen within Chitoura village (figures 1, and 3). During my first visit to the village, I asked to meet the sarpanch and was escorted to a male person who introduced himself as the sarpanch. He answered my questions and addressed village issues, but I later discovered that his wife was the sarpanch, although she was not very active in the village activities. The sarpanch (women candidate), and other female members of the village panchayat have the same passive attitude towards their active participation. Some of them live in Sagar City, and their husbands visit the village for panchayat work and agriculture. When we asked about the involvement of representative women, they replied "ye to mardo ka kaam hai hum kaya jane es sub me, ye sarpanchi to panch saal ki he aage to enke saath hi rehna hai" This is a male domain. We are not aware of all the work. This election is only for five years, but I have to live with my husband. They do not attend panchayat meetings and are also not aware of village problems and development policies.

Female participants are more unaware than the male population, females are not participating in the Panchayati Raj system and they use the vote as per the family male's decision. Previous studies by Xaxa (2013) and Kaul & Sahni (2009) also support this fact. Women never participated in the Gram Sabha and Panchayat system most important fact is that the sarpanch of the village is women, but when we talked to local people, they mentioned the name of her husband as sarpanch and the other nine women members also introduced by the name of their husbands. We discussed the factor, and then they (women) told us that it's not our tradition, or it is not women's work. They also share that women look good in the house while males are

outside of the home. The male-dominated fabric of society forced women to keep away from new initiatives of change. Hence, women are nothing more than proxies in this village (Kumar et al., 2012). There are several reasons behind this practice, like illiteracy, unawareness, financial constraints, pre-defined gender roles, and traditional attitudes toward women (Rana, 2020; Rana, et.al 2020; Goldfrank & Welp, 2023; Sinha, 2023).

Hence data reveals that villagers are not actively participating in the Panchayati Raj system lack education and awareness, and people don't know the importance of their rights or obligations. Caste factors and factionalism are the major issues in the village. At the micro level, the Gram Sabha is a people's institution and has been made a statutory body through a constitutional amendment. But villages' strong caste and gender stereotypes can be mainly attributed to less participation.

5. Conclusion

In the sphere of rural change and development, the active participation of local natives in self-mobilization is a crucial factor in achieving the goal of, economic growth and social justice at the grassroots level. The Gram Sabha, established through the 73rd constitutional amendment in India, provides a platform for direct democracy and enables rural people to participate in governance. However, the participation level of people in the Gram Sabha in the villages of Madhya Pradesh is significantly low.

For members of the Gram Sabha to participate constructively in grassroots governance, it is essential to know its responsibilities, the organization and finance of this system, and several other developmental programs accessible to them. After a critical evaluation of these particular points, the present study shows that rural people lack sufficient knowledge about Panchayati Raj Institutions and the developmental programs implemented for their benefit.

It is important to note that the success of democratic decentralization and development administration at the grassroots level is wholly dependent on the extent of participation in grassroots governance. This study supports our hypothesis that active participation assures rural development and does not reject our hypothesis about the level of awareness regarding rural development programs and the role of gender in participation.

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