



### **Gram Sabha Meetings in India: Processes, Outcomes and Perspectives**

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#### **Abstract**

73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution and subsequent development toward decentralisation has given certainty, continuity and strength to the *Panchayati Raj* System in India. The *gram sabha* (village assembly) has enabled people to participate in the development processes of village economy and society. The study reveals that the concept of participatory development could be put into practice provided awareness building regarding the role of *gram sabha* (GS) and capacity building are provided. The civil society organizations have to be promoted by the district administration for awareness generation and building the capacities of the members of the GS and *Panchayats*. The ongoing process might be sustained by institutionalizing it in attitudes and the work - culture of the elected representatives and officials at district and sub-district levels. It is also an opportunity for strengthening the *Panchayati Raj*, empowering the people and ensuring effective implementation of rural development works /schemes.

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## Introduction

The concept of *gram sabha* (village assembly) has been evolved through a historical process of people's struggle for their participation in developmental activities at different layers of governance including at local level. The *gram sabha* (GS) consists of all the adults of a village and thus designated as corporate body and the Gram Panchayat which is its Executive Committee. This concept has also received approval from several Indian political thinkers like Jai Prakash Narayan and Mahatma Gandhi. Jai Prakash Narayan, a Socialist thinker of India, advocated direct democracy at the village level in the form of *gram sabha*. *Gram sabha* has also been an integral part of the Gandhian concept of village *Swaraj* (self-rule). In order to provide a key place for the GS in the overall system of *Panchayati Raj*, a specific outline has been provided in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993( hereafter referred to as Central Act) and subsequently its extension to the scheduled areas by the Provisions of *Panchayats* (Extension to Scheduled Area)Act, 1996 (hereafter referred to as PESA).

In fact, GS has always been a central issue in the discussion of the academic circle. Seeing the importance of this institution in local governance, Union Government had declared the 1999-2000 and 2009-10 as the Year of the GS. But the declaration confined to paper because with some exception in a few states like West Bengal and Kerala, nothing worthwhile was happened in making GS as vibrant institution at local level on account of absence of power, lack of awareness, apathy of the villagers, lack of enthusiasm and absence of freedom on the part of this body. The caste and class difference have further reduced this body as a namesake institution for local governance in the country side.

However, there are quite a few oases of positive action and hope in the desert of inertia and despondency in the functioning of GSs which are basically created on individual initiative. Such indeed is the case of Sirsa<sup>2</sup> district where the meetings of the GSs have been held in campaign mode at the initiative of the Deputy Commissioner (DC) and Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC).

The present paper deals with the processes, outcomes and perspective of the campaign of holding the meetings of the GSs in Sirsa district of Haryana State of India with main objectives of involvement and participation of villagers in the process of their socio-economic development. The first section deals with the history of *Panchayati Raj* in India. This is followed by a brief sketch of the GS has been given and a discussion of the objectives and methodology adopted for holding the meetings of the GSs. The next section deals with people's participation and issues addressed in the meetings. The outcomes of the exercise are discussed and then the perspectives of the initiative taken for holding the meetings. This is followed by concluding observations.

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<sup>2</sup> Sirsa district came into being on August 26, 1975 and has a population of 11, 16, 649 of which 8, 23, 184 (73.72%) live in rural area. It has 333 Gram *Panchayats* spread over 7 Blocks. Of the total rural population, 28.24 per cent are SCs. Agricultural labourers are 1, 13,357 which is the highest in the state. The district was covered under the Sam Vikas Yojana, later on under the NREGA and now also covered under the Backward Regions Gram Funds scheme of the Ministry of *Panchayati Raj*, Government of India.

### History of Panchayati Raj in India

Although the democratic decentralization in terms of establishment of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions was a post-independence phenomenon, there has been a legacy and tradition of Village *Panchayats* in India since time immemorial. These bodies survived even during drastic changes and upheavals that took place. However, these institutions had completely lost their luster during the 'alien' regime which established centralized governance with some exceptions like Lord Ripon's initiative establishing local self-government. It was anathema for Lord Curzon who succeeded Ripon as Viceroy. However, the initiative bore fruits and in 1909 Viscount Morley appointed a Royal Commission on Decentralization. The outcome resulted in the Minto-Morley Reforms which led to the enlargement of elective elements in the local self-government structure.

The Indian National Congress (INC) in its 24<sup>th</sup> Session, demanded from the British Regime to initiate necessary steps to make all bodies from village *Panchayats* onwards elective with elected chairmen and support them with sufficient monetary help. By the Government of India Act, 1919, local self-government institution was made one of the provincial transferred subjects and put under the jurisdiction of elected Indian Ministries. Under this regime several enactments for the establishment of village *Panchayats* were passed in major states like Bengal (1919), Bihar (1920), Bombay (1920), C P and Berar (1920), Madras (1920), UP (1920), Punjab (1922) and Assam (1925).

From 1920 to Indian independence in 1947, the major aim of INC was independence. Hence, not much emphasis was given to the development of local self-government institutions. Even the INC Ministries in their short-lived period from 1937 to 1939 could not do much to put the local self-government on sound footing. In spite of all this, some pioneering efforts by various personalities were made in rural reconstruction. Rural Reconstruction and Sriniketan Institute, Martandam Rural Reconstruction Experiment (1921), the Gurgaon Experiment (1927), the Baroda Experiment (1932) and the Firka scheme in Madras were all started with the objective of bringing back life in its completeness into villages and development towards a more abundant life for the people, spiritually, mentally, physically, socially and economically. The Nilokheri Experiment called Mazdoor Manjil was based on the principle of "He who would not work, neither he shall eat". The Etawah Pilot Project was initiated with the objective to see as to what extent productive and social improvement, initiative, self-confidence and cooperation can be developed. It was expected that the experiences gained through these experiments would form the part of the programmes and schemes which would be started subsequently by the Governments.

The involvement of the people in their development through grassroots democratic institutions like *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) was contemplated in the First Five Year Plan in the early fifties after independence. Instead of establishing *Panchayats*, Community Development (CD) and National Extension Service Programmes were launched in 1952. These were ineffective in drawing participation in developmental activities due to the absence of effective instruments for participation at district and sub-district levels. This drew the attention of the Second Five Year Plan which stated democratic institutions within the district should be created where the entire community, particularly the weaker sections, might get involved in developmental activities. For this purpose, the Balvantrai Mehta Team (BMT) (1957) was appointed to study and present a report on the CD Projects and National Extension Services.

The team was expected, among other things, to assess the extent to which these programmes have succeeded in utilizing local initiatives and in creating institutions to ensure continuity in the process of improving the socio-economic conditions of the people in the countryside.

The BMT broadly suggested two directions for inducing participation in local decisions-making. First, administrative decentralization, and, second, bringing it under the control of elected bodies for effective implementation of developmental programmes. The BMT's recommendations envisaged a three-tier system for decentralization. Rajasthan was the first State where *Panchayati Raj* was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in October, 1959. Nine days later, Andhra Pradesh introduced the system. By mid-1960, *Panchayats* had been constituted across the country. Later on, some states set up committees to assess the progress made by the *Panchayats* and to suggest measures for their improvement. The Asoka Mehta Committee (1978), while reviewing and evaluating the implementation of *Panchayati Raj*, observed:

Politically speaking, it became a process of democratic seed-drilling in the Indian soil, making an average citizen more conscious of his rights than before. Administratively speaking, it bridged the gulf between bureaucratic elite and the people. Socio-culturally speaking, it generated a new leadership which was not merely relatively young in age but also modernistic and pro-social change in outlook. Finally, looked at from the developmental angle, it helped rural people cultivate a developmental psyche<sup>3</sup>.

The Committee, further observed as

Bureaucracy had probably its own role and by dissociating the PRIs from the development process...the officers would feel that they are primarily accountable for results...to the State Government. The officials knew no better than to trust their own fraternity. They would, on the one hand, therefore, be averse to PRIs being entrusted with additional functions, and on the other, would not easily get adjusted to working under the supervisions of elected representatives<sup>4</sup>.

The main forces behind the marginalization of PRIs were the bureaucracy and politicians at the Central and State levels who did not relish the idea of creating another centre of power at district level besides state capitals. Thus, the PRIs instead of emerging as units of self-government as envisaged in the Article 40 of the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution of India, were made a conduit of the Central and the State Governments to implement their schemes at local levels.

Again in mid-eighties onwards, the process of making *Panchayats* strong and vibrant was initiated. In 1985, the Planning Commission set up a committee to review the existing administrative arrangements for rural development and poverty alleviation program (popularly known as CAARD) under the chairmanship of Prof. G.V.K. Rao. The committee among other things, suggested revamping PRIs, giving planning functions to them, introduction of the

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<sup>3</sup> Report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions, Ashoka Mehta Chairman, 1978, p-8

<sup>4</sup> ibidi, p-5

concept of district budget, creation of the post of District Development Commissioners (DDC) to look after and co-ordinate all the developmental activities in the district.

In June 1986, the Government of India set up a committee under the chairmanship of L.M. Singhvi to prepare a concept paper on the revitalization of the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions. The committee recommended that the local self-government should be constitutionally recognized, protected and preserved by the inclusion of a new chapter in the Constitution. Between December 1987 and June 1988, five workshops of District Magistrates were organized at different places in the country on 'Responsive Administration' in which the then Prime Minister, Shri Rajiv Gandhi participated. These workshops, inter alia, recommended that a democratic framework at the local level was indispensable for responsive administration. States like Karnataka which wanted to devolve powers to the *Panchayats* realized that a constitutional amendment was a must. At the end of 1988, a sub-committee of a Consultative Committee of Parliament under the chairmanship of Mr. P.K Thungon recommended constitutional status to the *Panchayati Raj*. The Constitution (seventy-third) Amendment Act 1992 saw the light of the day on April 24, 1993.

This Act has given a new lease of life to the *Panchayats*. However, the major drawback of the Act is that, instead of having been clearly specified, the functions and powers of *Panchayats* have been left to the discretion of the State Government, which is evident from the Article 243G of the Constitution. This Article states:

The legislature of a State may, by law, endow the *Panchayats* with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institution of self-government and such law may contain provisions for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon *Panchayats* at the appropriate level, subject to such conditions as may be specified therein, with respect to (a) the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice; and (b) the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the Eleventh Schedule<sup>5</sup>.

Though this Article is the head and heart of the whole scheme of decentralization contained in the Act, but it is not mandatory on the part of the State because in this Article the word 'may' is used five times. Thus, it is at the discretion of the State Government that it 'may' give or 'may not' give powers to the *Panchayats*. In fact, this casts a duty both on the Union as well as the State Legislatures to establish and nourish the village *Panchayats* so as to make them effective institutions of self-governance. Subsequently, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act was extended to the scheduled areas of the country by the Provisions of *Panchayats* (Extension to scheduled Area) Act, 1996. This legislation has given more powers and responsibilities to not only *Panchayats* but also to GS.

### **History of Gram Sabha in India**

The GS is the fulcrum of the entire *Panchayati Raj* System as it enables each and every voter of village to participate in decision-making at local level. Hence, it is a strong strength to local

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<sup>5</sup> The Constitution (seventy - third) Amendment Act, 1992.

people. The idea of involvement and participation of villagers in their development through the institution of GS was accepted by the British Administration and it was incorporated in the Village Panchayat Acts passed by some of the provincial legislatures. Section 36(4) the Bombay Village Panchayats Act, 1933 states:

A Panchayat shall convene, in a manner and at a time prescribed, a meeting of all adult residents of the village and the statement of accounts together with a report on the administration for the preceding year and the programmes of the work proposed for the year following shall be read out and explained at such meeting<sup>6</sup>.

However, nothing worthwhile in this regard happened due to the lack of awareness among villagers and indifferent attitudes of political leaders and officials. The findings of the report of the Study Team on the position of Gram Sabha in Panchayati Raj Movement is worth mentioning:

...the adult population of many villages where Gram Sabhas exist, were in most of the cases unaware of the rights and responsibilities which belonged to them as members of the Gram sabha. It was likewise observed that the members of Gram sabha could not quite often even distinguish between the Gram sabha and the Panchayat of the village<sup>7</sup>.

Article 243-A of the Central Act does not specify the functions and powers of it except to say that “A Gram sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a state may, by law, provide”<sup>8</sup>. This enabling provision has largely resulted in giving innocuous functions such as to endorse, to recommend, to suggest, to consider annual accounts and administrative reports and audit notes, etc. to the GS. Implementation of the suggestions and recommendations of the GS could be ignored by the Gram Panchayats as these are not binding on the latter. It is important, therefore, that GS is empowered to approve and sanction all items of work and activities to be taken up at the Gram Panchayat level. Provisions should be made in the Panchayat Act to enable GSs to play a role of a planner, decision-maker and auditor.

PESA is another land mark legislation which is extended to Fifth Scheduled States namely Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Orissa has not only given control of Jal (water), Jungal (forests) and Jamin (land) in the hands of tribals but also ensured centrality to this body in the implementation of various programmes and schemes at the local level. However, the State Legislatures have not been harmonized with PESA so far. It shows the indifference on the part of the State Governments.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Evolution of Panchayati Raj in India by R. V Jathar, Institute of Economic Research, Dharwar, 1964, p- 173.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p- 176.

<sup>8</sup> The Constitution (seventy - third) Amendment Act, 1992.

## Objectives and Methodology

### Objectives

The basic ideas behind holding the meetings of GSs was the involvement of villagers in identification of their needs, problems faced by them in the implementation of various programmes at their level and solve them there and then only, if possible. It may be stated that this was an experiment to put government at the door step of the villagers. However, the specific objectives of this exercise are given below.

- (i) to provide relevant information of the activities of fifteen departments namely Horticulture, Agriculture, Forest, Health, Public Health, Social welfare, Irrigation, Electricity, Animal Husbandry, Food and Civil Supply, Women and Child, Education, Rural Development and Development and *Panchayat*;
- (ii) to inform villagers about the expenditure incurred on the activities carried out in the villages by the respective departments and sought opinion of the assembly on the quality of work carried out during the reference period;
- (iii) try to solve the problems, if any, faced by the villagers in the implementation of the programmes.
- (iv) to register the demand raised by the villagers relating to the programmes being implemented by various departments in the village for taking necessary action;
- (v) to collect first hand information from the assembly about various aspects of the village for preparing socio-economic plan of the village.

### Methodology

This study was not planned one. It was thought that this is a wonderful initiative taken up by the District Administration of Sirsa and needs to be documented as good practice for replication elsewhere. The experiences which are being discussed here pertain to the GSs' meetings held during April - May 2007 in this District.

A participatory approach was adopted in observing the meetings. The meetings were observed and we also stayed with the district administration in the village and observed keenly the activities which were taking place in the meetings of the GSs as well as in the camp. We also talked to common people of the villages to ascertain from them the awareness among them about these meetings<sup>9</sup>.

As many as nine meetings of the GSs were observed. Of these, 2 were in the Ellanabad Block and seven in the Rania Block of the district (see Table 1). Although these meetings were general in nature and no quorum requirement is required for them as per the Haryana

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<sup>9</sup> While entering a village, we asked a person who was smoking leisurely under the tree about the meeting. He told us immediately to go straight and that the meeting was being held in the campus of the school. When asked him about his own participation in the meeting, he said that he too was coming to participate in the meeting.

*Panchayati Raj* Act, but it is interesting to note that at least 10 per cent quorum has been maintained in all the meetings held in the district. Table 1 also shows that quorum in all the GSs was maintained across both blocks. It was desirable that all members of the GP should have been present in the meetings. However, presence of more than 50 per cent of the members of GP in these meetings is a positive development in itself, in view of the fact that neither the members of the GP are keen to attend these meetings nor is the *Sarpanch* interested in inviting the members to the meetings.

**Table 1.** Details of the *Gram Panchayats* where GSs Meeting were observed.

Sl.No.	Name of Block & GP	Total No. of Members of GS	Total No. of members of GS who attended the meetings	Total No. of Members of GP who attended the meetings
1	<b>Elnabad Block</b> Sant Nagar	6000	600	10 out of 20
2	Jeevan Nagar	1500	150	Except 2 all were present
3	<b>Rania Block</b> Sulatanpuria	1575	215	50 % were present
4	Dhotad	2281	250	All were present
5	Bangi Dhanni	448	103	All were present
6	Ranjitpur Kheri	955	92	Except 3 all members were present
7	Rampur Kheri	1150	200	All were present
8	Theed Mohar Singh	967	122	All were present
9	Dhani Satnam Singh	1075	145	All were present

The programme for the conduct of meetings of GS was chalked out systematically. A group of 15 *Gram Panchayats* (GPs) of a Block was taken as a cluster. All the Block Development and *Panchayat* Officers (BDPOs) of the districts, Executive Engineer (*Panchayat Raj*), Sub-Divisional Officers (*Panchayati Raj*), Junior Engineers (*Panchayati Raj*), Social Education and *Panchayat* Officers (SEPOs), District Development and *Panchayat* Officer (DDPO), District Forests Officer (DFO), ASCO, *Sarpanches*, *Gram Sachivs* and Teachers have been involved in this process. They have all been working under the leadership of the Additional Deputy Commissioner of the District.

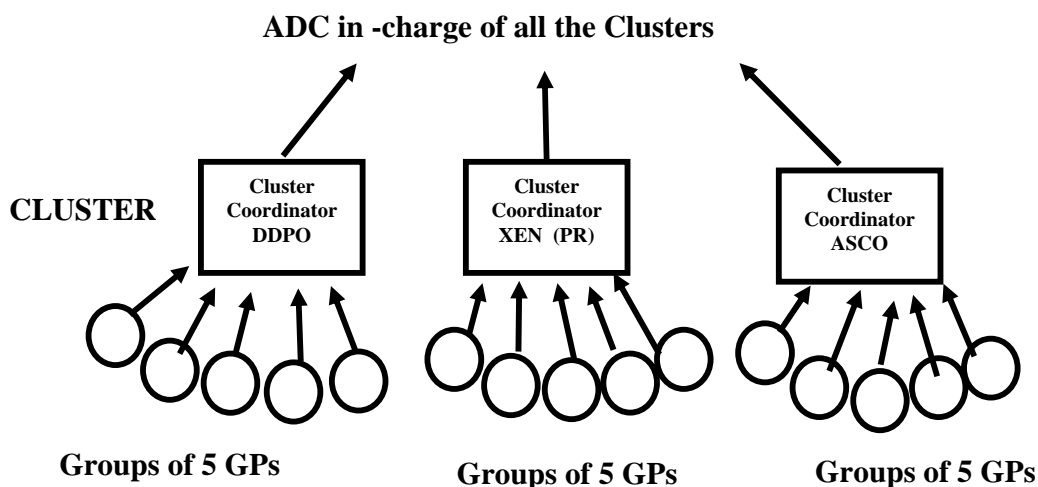
The preparatory work for holding the meetings of the GS started at 8 am and it was usually 10:30 pm or even later it ended. The process of holding the meetings of the GS was organised in a campaign mode. In addition to adopting normal practice of holding the meetings of the GS, the dates of holding the meetings were published in local newspapers and a van of the Department of Public Relations was used for announcement and publicity in the concerned villages. The officials of Public Relation Department visited the villages in advance of holding the meetings to ensure the villagers were aware about the date, time and main agenda of the meeting. Announcements were also made from the public announcement system of the

Gurudawara and Temples to give maximum publicity of the event. The meetings were organised in public places like schools or *Panchayat ghar* situated in the middle of the village to ensure maximum participation.

For every GP, there were three officials to help the *Panchayat* for holding the meeting. The officer -in -charge of the meeting was either a BDPO or an SDO (PR) or an SEPO. He is supported by the Junior Engineer and *Gram Sachiv*. The *Gram Sachiv* drafted the proceedings of the meeting. Local/block/district level line department officials were also present in the meetings and told the villagers about the activities of their departments. The meetings generally started at 10 am and continue to 2 pm. In some villages, the meetings continued into evening as well.

There was one coordinator for five GPs. DDPO, XEN (PR) and ASCO acted as coordinators. All the three officers visited the villages allocated to them in the morning when the process was initiated. Their main job was to help the officer- in -charge of the GP and his team. All officials were well connected with each other through mobile phones. As a result of the pro-active and concerted efforts made by the ADC, participation generally exceeded the quorum of special meetings. The organizational structure and management of the meetings is given below.

**Figure 1.** Methodology of Conducting the Meetings of the GSs



### Conduct of Meetings and Their Proceedings

The meeting, chaired by the *Sarpanch*, started with the introductory remarks of the officer-in-charge of the meeting, The representative of each of the fifteen departments explained the activities his/her department is carrying out in the village and what specific activities are being taken up by the department in the village where the meeting was being held. In case the deputed official of a particular department did not turn up due to some urgency or indisposition, the officer -in-charge apprised the villagers about the schemes of that department. This was followed by the question and answer session in which the villagers tried to update themselves about the work being undertaken in the village.

### Camp Work

After holding the meetings, the proceedings of these meetings were drafted by the *Gram Sachivs* and signed by the *Sarpanch* and Officer-in- Charge of the meeting. After this, the proceedings register was sent to the camp office where the coordinators used to vet the proceedings keeping in view the objectives of the meetings. Among others, they viewed whether or not the committees envisaged have been constituted and whether the chairpersons of such committees have been appointed or not. If any deficiency was noticed, they rectified it. Finally, the chief coordinator, ADC, used to examine the proceedings.

### Participation and the Issues Addressed

Effective participation took place in the meetings of the GSs, which is evident from the attendance of these meetings. Women also participated in a large number in these meetings. Among others, one of the reasons for such gathering was central location. There were common issues/problems/concerns raised by the villagers. The role of the officer-in-charge was important to create enabling environment for participation in the meetings and encourage individuals to raise issues in the meeting. He could manage the overall presentation even if the officials of the concerned department were not present. Practically, the officer-in-charge was acting as *Sarpanch* in de facto sense in the meetings. Seeing this, it may be said that the meeting was not conducted by the *Sarpanch* while it should be as per the *Haryana Panchayati Raj Act*. But the positive aspect of this was that it was a practical training to the *Sarpanch* which enabled him/her to know how a meeting of the GS is conducted. The common issues/grievances raised in these meetings are summarized below:

- Drinking water is not supplied properly by the Public Health Department. Pipe line was not laid down even after approaching concerned officials time and again.
- Lack of doctors and unavailability of medicine and X-ray machines. Similar problems are raised in relation to animal dispensary.
- The issue of the encroachment of common land also raised in these meetings. Besides farming land, the land earmarked for animal carcasses has also been encroached upon resulting in serious health problems since the dead animals are disposed off on either side the village pathways.
- School building was constructed in the adjoining hamlets of the main village. Secondly, additional rooms have not been constructed in the existing schools.
- Electricity related issues were raised almost every village. These related to the repair of the transformers and non- erection of electric polls even after completing all formality in this regard. Electric wires which touch houses have not been shifted to the suitable places. Issue of the non- payment of bills and theft of electricity also cropped up in one GS meeting. On this, the ex-*Sarpanch* commented that "*Chori karna hamari majboori hai*" (committing thefts under compulsion) because they could not pay the bill of electricity due to low earnings and less or very little surplus income available from farming activities.

- Aganwari Workers have not been sincere toward their work as the desired services have not been given to the target groups. It is interesting to mention here the case of Sant Nager GP where one person had brought the cooked food (i.e. dalia) prepared by the Aganwari Centre for serving the children. The dish was not cooked properly. The issue was put before the assembly for taking action in the matter. After consultation, the consensus emerged that the woman who prepared it should be replaced by another. Subsequently, the former *Sarpanch* of the GP and other members of the GS requested of the assembly to give one more chance to her. And if it appened again then her services may be terminated. This was accepted by the assembly and the Supervisor (ICDS) was been alerted to monitor the activities of the Aganwari Centre so that such lapses can be avoided in future.
- Transport facilities was another issue. Villagers desired the extension of bus services to their villages.
- An important issue that emerged was the construction of houses particularly under the India Awaas Yojana. Villagers have raised the issue that under the scheme, houses are being constructed for the well-off households and not for the needy and the poor. In this connection, villagers have been apprised/told in detailed about the latest guidelines for identification of the below poverty line households and they have been assured that such type of the problem will not recur in future. They have also been told that retired Army men have been employed for this purpose to ensure proper identification of the poor.
- Preparation of yellow and pink ration cards and not getting the facilities of Public Distribution System were the other concerns raised by the villagers.
- Under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the issue of measuring the work done by the workers and timely payment of wages were also raised. All those who have been issued job cards have not demanded work under this Act because the nature of work taken up under the scheme. Participants also stated that, initially, people were under the impression that they would get the unemployment allowance without doing any work.

These problems/issues have been registered in the proceedings book. It is clear from the above that almost all the issues raised pertain to the access to basic needs.

### **Outcomes of the Meetings of Gram Sabhas**

There were several outcomes of the meetings which were observed in the countryside of the Sirsa District. First, there was a lot of awareness regarding the meetings of the GS in the village community. For the first time, villagers came to know about the meetings of the GS and they were initially sceptical about the announcement of the presence of the officials and also the visit of the ADC in these meetings. However, having seen with their own eyes the actual scenario; they realized that they were wrong. Hence, the campaign has helped in changing their perception about the role and importance of GS in the village community and *Panchayat* functionaries.

Next, villagers raised a number of problems affecting them because for the first time they have seen such gathering of people and officials. The problems raised by the villagers have been registered in the proceedings of the meetings. The officials of different Departments who were present there also noted the same for rectification. Besides, the senior officials of public utility department like Public Health also visited the camp and noted the problems raised by the villagers to take immediate follow up action in the matter.

Different committees pertaining to education, health, sanitation, etc., have also been formed/or membership revised in case the existing members have not shown any interest in their activities. It is expected that these committees would be instrumental in taking up the earmarked issues more seriously and take necessary action for the development of village community.

Under MG NREGA, there is a provision for engaging a *Rozgar Sahayaks* (Employment Helpers) for attending to the work of the Scheme. These *Sahayaks* have been appointed by the GPs. An outcome based on opinions of the villagers, particularly the workers who worked under the Scheme, was obtained whether the person should continue or not and decision of his retaining was taken accordingly. In case his work was not found satisfactory, another person from the panel already prepared and approved by the GS in the meetings held earlier, has been chosen as *Sahayak*. Besides, a panel of mates has also been prepared to oversee the work of the workers who worked under the MGNREGA. Hence, through these meetings, the undue pressure from the different quarters for engaging the persons as *Sahayaks* and mates has been prevented as the list of the willing persons has been approved by the GS.

Another outcome was one of the members of GS in Sultanpuria GP said that "whatever is said in the function like this is hardly adhered to later on by both the elected representatives and officials"<sup>10</sup>. This indicates the experiences of the villagers that from their point of view holding meetings of GS is a government driven programme and after holding the meeting, there will be business as usual. This notion of the villagers has to be changed by taking action on each and every item decided, otherwise people may lose faith in the sincerity of the efforts of the district and sub- district administration. In this sense and to this extent, this process of holding the meetings and taking action on the issues raised in these can be said to have increased the accountability and responsibility of the bureaucracy to the grassroots democracy.

A key outcome was that the holding of meetings proved to be a capacity building exercise for the officials and Presidents of the GPs and chairpersons of various subject committees. Officials did their homework, prepared their lectures and spoken before the gathering. This enhanced their capacity and they may be tapped by the other state level institutions as a pool of trainers and may be used for various local level training. The delivery of some of the officials was so effective that they may be used as state level trainers by state level institutions

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<sup>10</sup> After the lecture, concerned officer also told the location of his office and the telephone number. Villagers in some villages, in addition to asking about the landline numbers, also asked about the mobile phone numbers of the officers, knowing that rarely do the officers sit in the offices so that they can contact them as and when needed.

Finally, this exercise proved very useful for the administration to have first hand information about the departmental problems being faced by the people. This will enable various departments to prepare their estimates of different activities/work correctly.

### Perspective

Giving constitutional status to the institution of GS is a remarkable change in the rural institutional system of the country because this corporate body allows each and every voter to partake in the processes of decentralised governance, planning and development. This institution could be responsive, accountable and efficient, if district and sub-district level politicians and bureaucracy allow these institutions to function as viable and pulsating bodies. The main reason for not making this institution strong is the apprehension of a big risk involved in promotion of this body for politicians and bureaucracy because it has inherent potential to expose their misdeeds in the works related to rural development and poverty alleviation. There is a silver lining in the dark scenario in the form of the case of campaign that took place in Sirsa as the initiative was taken by the bureaucracy itself with a sense of sincere commitment and dedication. At the same times, it raises a question mark regarding the sustainability of such efforts.

The campaign was started at the initiative of the ADC and with the active support and guidance of Deputy Commissioner. A similar type of campaign was also started by the district administration specifically for preparing the perspective plan under MGNREGA prior to this exercise. The question and the point of concern now is would such type of efforts continue when these officers move away from the scene since other officers may not have the same mindset and dedication. This apprehension arises from the absence of such efforts in other districts of the State. Hence, the task ahead for the district administration is how to institutionalize the campaign so that meetings of the GSs held regularly in a sustainable mode, whoever the officers are on the scene.

The other point or issue of concern about this campaign relates to its demonstration effect. Expectations of the people have arisen as they saw the GSs as problem -solving institutions. If the issues addressed in the meetings are not simultaneously attended to by the bureaucracy, this might be a case of derailment, people might again lose hope and faith in GS and may believe what they experienced was an exception. By working in the present campaign of the exercise, the bureaucracy has enhanced its accountability to the people. There shall have to be a review of the progress in the next GS meeting. Shortfalls and failures to keep the promises made in the last meeting of the GS will have to be noted. The people shall have to be given reasons for what could not be achieved. Only then we can say that people are now timely empowered in the decentralised governance mode.

### Conclusion

Certainty, continuity and strength have to be imparted to the institution of GS for making *Panchayati Raj* the people's raj in the real sense of the term. The efforts made by the District Administration towards this have really been commendable and should serve as beacon point and positive lessons for others. By holding the meetings of GS and really making them problem- solving bodies did, indeed, bring a fresh breeze in rural terrain of Sirsa district. The process which has been started might be sustained by institutionalizing it in attitudes and the

work - culture of the elected representatives and officials at district and sub-district levels. This is the challenge before the Deputy Commissioner and the Additional Deputy Commissioner who have initiated and pioneered the process of holding meetings of GSs in campaign mode. It is also an opportunity for them to do their due for strengthening the *Panchayati Raj* System, empowering the people and ensuring effective implementation of rural development works /schemes.

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