

Gram Sabha: Composition, Functions and Role

Gramsabha is the window to see the entire democratic India. The role of Gramsabha is essential component in rural development, which can change the destiny of the nation in its meetings. Gramsabha can bring the political will power even in the common man of a nation. The real success of Gramsabha depends upon the quality of people occupying their seats in Gramsabha meetings. Effective functioning of Gramsabha makes Panchayat institutions abode of prosperity and dignity. In ancient city-states of Greece democracy and participatory decision-making was in vogue. Aristotle and other great philosophers of his time hailed this system as one of the best possible system of government and administration. There was no scope for negligence of citizen's needs and demands since each individual was part of the government mechanism. Mahatma Gandhiji expressed his opinion about Gramsabha that "Democracy must in essence mean the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the societies of the common good of all", he believed the democracy enlightened and disciplined the world, and he says "I would like to go and live in villages. That is real India, my India."

The spirit of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution is to take the democratic governance and its institutions to the grass root levels and it states, "In all states there shall be a Gramsabha in each village to which the Panchayat will be accountable. The power and function shall be assigned by a law passed by the state legislature".

GRAMSABHA AND ITS IMPORTANCE

The concept of Gramsabha in India, as indigenous model of development since time immemorial manifests both as the national sensibility and ostentation; it is evolved through the ages, acquiring a definite programme of action. Decentralization through

Panchayat Raj system provides the necessary avenue to the individual citizen and the community for their genuine and maximum self-expression as well as contribution to the social good. Panchayat Raj and Gramsabha were discovered to supply the local interest and excite local initiative in the field of development. These institutions are intended to be the schools for learning lessons of democratic responsibilities in political education. It is to prepare the citizen for responsible living and to develop leaders who could take control of democratic intuitions at state and national level.

The Gramsabha has a key role in bringing about transparency in the functioning of the Gram Panchayat, and in ensuring equitable distribution of benefits. Every Panchayat law gives a prominent legal position to the institution of the Gramsabha. Empowering the Gramsabha will surely dilute the discretionary powers of the Gram Panchayat members and reassert the character of villages as social units, regardless of whom the individuals vote for.

The very spirit behind the introduction of these institutions has been to associate people in rural area with governance and they're by involving them in decision-making process. Thus, the Gramsabha have been a natural choice for building up an institutional structure to take governance closer to the people. The Gramsabha, an electoral college of voters, has the responsibility of promoting participatory democracy by providing key inputs for preparing development plans. Commenting on the importance of the Gramsabha, Rajani Kothari states that, "representative bodies have their inherent dynamics of power politics and willy-nilly end up vesting effective authority in the politician-bureaucrat nexus. Responsible and accountable is to provide larger citizen involvement in new variants of old institutions like Gramsabha, which can combine older forms of informal consensus-making mechanisms with the more formal, institutionalized and legal forms, decreed by legislation. With the new awakening in the rural areas, these bodies have the potential of overseeing the working of elected bodies and over time with growing confidence that they cannot be brow-beaten by dominant individuals or castes, become a force to reckon with".

Gramsabha can only provide an element of direct democracy where people are to be caught in a true, live and working sense. It is an institution through which the concept of participatory democracy takes firm roots in the orbit of small community, when face-to-face relationship obtains and direct communication with leadership and

administration is established. The working of Gramsabha facilitates in boosting up the popular interest in political, civic and developmental affairs and their enthusiasm in all village people. On the whole the Gramsabha has ever played an important role in the following fields:

- Strengthening of grass root democracy.
- Popular control over Panchayats.
- Better community harmony.
- Foundation of Panchayat Raj set up.
- Effective communication.
- Grass root agency for planning and development.
- Control over village level functionaries. Democratic supervision.
- As agency of social and political education.
- Closeness of policymaking and policy execution.

Gramsabha forum has high potential for grounding democracy at the grass roots facilitating socio-economic inclusion, participation in planning and implementation of development programmer and enduring accountability of the Panchayat to the electors.

EVOLUTION OF GRAMSABHA

Though the importance of Panchayat Raj Institution was recognized in India in the late 1950's the policy makers have taken almost 45 years to attempt the statutory reforms to address the major issues in the local self government institutions in the form of 73rd. Constitutional Amendment which has made specific provision for the establishment of Gramsabha. The Article 243(G) defines a village as one specified by the Governor by public notifications to be a village for the purpose of the Act and may as well include a group of villages so specified. Article 243(A) of the Constitution states that, "A Gramsabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at

the village level as the legislature of a state, may, by law, provide” and Article 243(B) defines Gramsabha as “a body consisting of all persons registered as voters in the electoral roll relating to the village within the area of the Panchayat at the village level”.

Gramsabha Under 1959 Act:

The Act of 1959 had not mentioned the word Gramsabha anywhere and instead of that it had empowered the Gram Panchayat to convene a meeting of the adult residents of the village and to place before the meeting the statement of accounts, a report of the administration for the preceding year and work proposed for the following year.

Gramsabha Under 1983 Act:

The 1983 Act, II chapter deals with the structural and functional aspects of Gramsabha. The Gramsabha was made up persons who were included in the electoral rolls pertaining to the particular village. The Deputy Commissioner had power to constitute a Gramsabha for a part of a village by notifications. The Gramsabha had to meet from time to time, at least twice in a year with a gap of six months. These meetings had to be presided over by the president of the Mandal Panchayat. The Gramsabha was entrusted with the following four functions:

- To prepare and promote development schemes for the village.
- To organize sanitation and drainage schemes.
- To mobilize voluntary labor and contribution in kind and cash for initiating programme for the community welfare.
- To assist the Mandal Panchayat in the implementation of development schemes and programmes.

Gramsabha Under 1993 Act:

This was enacted to bring the functioning of Panchayats in line with the national pattern. This Act replaced the earlier Act, namely Zilla Parishads, Taluka Panchayat Samitis, Mandal Panchayat and Nyaya Panchayat ACT, 1983, consequent upon the

changes proposed in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. The new Act stipulated that, Gramsabha as a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral roll relating to a village comprised within the area of a Gram Panchayat. While realizing the importance of people's participation, the Act states in its preamble that the Panchayats have been established for promoting vital participation of the people and more effective implementation of rural development programmes. To make this possible Chapter II, Section 3 of the Act enjoins the Gram Panchayats to convene Gramsabha meetings from time to time, at least two meetings in a year with a gap of six months.

MODIFICATION OF GRAMSABHA GUIDELINES

The efforts of the Government to streamline the process of conduction of Gramsabha meetings by modifying the guidelines for instance, in the year 1999 (No.RDP.41.GPA.99-dated April 26-1999) the Government introduced new guidelines for holding Gramsabha meetings. As per these guidelines, moderators were introduced for the first time, had the responsibilities of moderating the proceedings and deliberations of the meetings and to explain about the various development programmes implemented by the Panchayats and development departments. The Gramsabha meetings were monitored and coordinated by the Executive Officer of the Taluka Panchayat with the prior knowledge of the presidents of the respective Gram Panchayat.

With a purpose of further streamlining the process of calling Gramsabha meetings, once again the Department of RDPR (Rural Development and Panchayat Raj) came out with new guidelines in the year 2001. As per the Circular, No. RDP: 222:GPA: 2001, "the Government is pleased to withdraw all earlier guidelines and issue the new guidelines in the true spirit of democratic decentralization." As per the new guidelines, the Gramsabha meetings had to be convened as per the calendar below:

- First quarterly meeting: April-May
- Second quarterly meeting: July-August
- Third quarterly meeting: October-November
- Fourth quarterly meeting: January – February

In the first meeting the Gramsabha was expected to consider and review the progress of previous year programmes, give an approval to annual plans and finalize the lists of beneficiaries.

In the second meetings, the Gramsabha was given the responsibilities of reviewing the work of Gram Panchayat for the first three months.

In the third meeting, the Gramsabha had to consider the action taken on the report on Jamabandhi conducted by the Gram Panchayat, half-year review of action planned, review the demand collection and balance.

In the fourth meeting the Gramsabha had to discuss the plan details for the ensuing year, to initiate the process of selection of beneficiaries and revision and review of new taxes and fees. Deviating from earlier guidelines that entrusted the responsibility of calling meetings on the Executive Officer, the new guidelines authorized the President of the Gram Panchayat to call the Gramsabha meetings with at least one-tenth of the total electorate of the village or 100 members, whichever is less. As far as possible one-third of the members present should be women or belong to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. Decisions to be taken or recommended are to be treated as resolutions and should be decided either by voting or secret ballot.

FORMATION OF GRAMSABHA

Gramsabha is the Prime Village Assembly consisting of the people themselves and not of their representatives. It forms the foundational tier or level of the entire structure of rural democracy. In a democracy, it is very important to ensure institutional responsiveness in favor of the people. Gramsabha has been created to operationalize/functionalize and expected to respond constructively, positively and continuously to the needs, problems, aspirations and interests of the people.

Gram Panchayat and Gramsabha

Under the provision of the Article 40 of the Indian Constitution, the Gram Panchayat are constituted as detailed below.

- **Declaration of the Area of a Panchayat**

Panchayat means any area declared under the clause 4 of the Act as the area of the Panchayat. Subject to the general or special provision of the relevant government orders, the Deputy Commissioner can declare a village or a group of villages, with a population not less than 5000 and not more than 7000 as the area of a Panchayat and specify its headquarters. For some districts the government is entitled to notify areas with a population less than 2500 also as Panchayats. In addition, if necessary, the government can order any area as Panchayat without considering the population of that area, as a special case.

STRUCTURE OF GRAM PANCHAYAT

As per the clause 5 of the Panchayat Act, for every 400 populations or part there of one Panchayat member will be elected. The clause 4 of the Act provides for election of one chairman and another as Vice Chairman from among the elected members of the Panchayat.

STRUCTURE OF GRAMSABHA

The role of Gramsabha in the development activities and as such the Gram Panchayats constituted under clause 3(A) of Act, are compulsorily required to convene at least two meetings of the Gramsabha in a year. Here the term 'Gram' refers to the area or group of people notified for the purpose of the Act by the Government. Gramsabha, which functions as an organ of Gram Panchayat, is required to meet at least once in six months. If 1/10 of the members of the Gramsabha have submitted a request for a meeting a special meeting of the Gramsabha is to be convened. Care will be taken to have a minimum gap of 3 months between two special meetings of the Gramsabha. When the convener of the special meetings fails to conduct the meeting as per rule 4 and 5 of the special meetings the Executive officer will convene the special meetings and the Panchayat Secretary will take necessary steps in this regard.

PUBLIC NOTICE OF MEETINGS AND ITS AGENDA

The convener of the special meeting, with the help of Panchayat Secretary has to issue a public notice of the meeting and its agenda at least two weeks in advance. It should have information about the date and time and place of the meeting. Publicity may be

given if necessary through, paper notifications, announcement and bills, posters or notification on the Panchayat notice board.

QUORUM FOR THE MEETING

The quorum for the meetings of the Gramsabha is not less than 1/10 of the membership or 100 members whichever is less. There should be a minimum of 10 members from each ward of the Panchayat area and among them 30% must be women. The number of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe members must be in proportion to their population.

CONDUCT OF GRAMSABHA MEETINGS

- The meetings of the Gramsabha are presided over by the Panchayat Chairman. In his absence the Vice-Chairman presides over the meetings. If both of them are absent a nominated member presides over the meetings.
- The Topics for discussion in the Gramsabha: The Gramsabha can discuss on most of the issues concerned with the Gram Panchayat like its finances, taxes, development activities, etc. Some of them are:
 - Budget provisions.
 - Details of various plans.
 - Subject wise distribution of grants.
 - Details of public works undertaken in the Panchayat area, the Expenditure involved and material used etc.

The Gram Panchayat is also expected to present the following details to the Gramsabha.

- Explanatory note on the previous year's annual accounts of income and expenditure.
- Audit statement of previous year and the action taken report on that.

- Report on tax collection and action taken in this regard.

MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE GRAMSABHA

The main objectives of the Gramsabha are:

- Ensure people's participation in governance.
- Bring transparency in administration.
- Identifying problems at local level, determining priority and finding solutions.
- Providing social justice.
- Effective implementation of rural development programme.

Issues the Gramsabha are required to take care include the following:

- The Gramsabha are required to be convened at least twice in a year particularly during April/May and October/November months. In order to conduct these meetings in a systematic way, the Executive officers of the Taluka Panchayats have to organize a meeting of all the Chairmen of the Gram Panchayats of the concerned taluka and discuss the procedures and modalities with them. A period of one week or ten days may be fixed to convene the Gramsabha of all Gram Panchayats of the taluka. The timetable of the Gramsabha has to be notified at least two weeks in advance. The meetings may preferably schedule in the afternoons so as to enable maximum participation of members.
- The Executive officer should nominate an officer of the Taluka/Zilla Panchayat to participate as observer and guide the discussions of the Gramsabha. The names of such officers should also be notified in the calendar of the Gramsabha. It would be of great help to have an officer to assist the observer officer. Generally in Panchayats with large populations two or more officers are appointed as observers.
- The officers appointed as observers/ guides have the responsibility of giving

advises to conduct the Gramsabhas in an organized way by following the rules and regulations, assisting discussions about the different activities of the various departments of the Taluka/Zilla Panchayats, recording the minutes of the discussions held and resolutions passed in the Gramsabha and bringing these matters to the notice of the Taluka/Zilla Panchayats. The officer nominated as observer must be well informed and conversant with the development activities of the Gram Panchayat, Taluka Panchayat Zilla Panchayat and must be able to answer questions raised by the members of the Gramsabha.

- The calendar of the Gramsabha is required to be notified on the notice board of the Gram Panchayat and Taluka Panchayats and given due publicity through Panchayat newsletters local dailies and radio, etc.
- In every village the date of Gramsabha is to be announced in a traditional manner by beating the drums at least a week before the scheduled date. This needs to be continued until the day before the scheduled Gramsabha.
- Gram Panchayat must ensure the attendance of the members in large number at the scheduled date and time of the Gramsabha. Especially they have to ensure attendance of women and other weaker sections in large number.
- To carry on the business of the Gramsabha, it is obligatory to ensure the attendance of scheduled caste and tribe members in proportion to their population. If the attendance of the total members is less than 10 percent of the voters of the village or 100 people, the Gramsabha is to be postponed to a future date but not beyond a week. There should be at least ten members from each ward of the Panchayats in these Gramsabhas. In the absence of the Chairman the Vice-Chairman or any other authorized member of the Panchayat can preside over the meetings of the Gramsabha.
- The officer designated, as 'observer' should reach the village at least two hours prior to the scheduled meeting and satisfies himself that the Panchayat Secretary has taken necessary steps to hold the Gramsabha.
- The Panchayat Secretary has to prepare a detailed note on issues listed as

agenda for the Gramsabha and get the approval of the gram Panchayat at least ten days in advance. A report containing the details of Panchayat's previous year's activities, current year's programmes, the latest audit report and the details of the agenda items of the Gramsabha is to be prepared and minimum of 100 copies of this report are to be printed and may be sold to the members/publics at nominal price of one rupee.

- Gramsabha is not to be held as a mere formality. It should be held with interest and enthusiasm, for which the Gram Panchayat has to seek the cooperation of the people. They can arrange for pendal, loudspeakers etc. to give it a festive look.

For the purpose of record, photographs of the Gramsabha are to be sent to the Executive officer of the concerned Taluka Panchayat.

- The Gram Panchayat may decide to invite officers or experts to give necessary directions and guidelines to the Gramsabha. The following officers are essentially invited.
- The Medical officer of the Primary Health Centre.
- The Managers of the Grameena Bank/Commercial Bank in Panchayat area.
- The Veterinary Doctor or his Assistants in the Panchayat area.
- The Chairman of the village water and hygiene Committee.
- The respective Anganawadi Assistants.
- The Engineer of the Engineering Section of the Zilla Panchayat who is in-charge of the concerned village.

If the above guidelines are followed the Gramsabha can function effectively

POWERS AND FUNCTIONS OF GRAMSABHAS

The Gramsabhas have to play a prominent role if the villages are to march towards development. Only effective Gramsabhas have ensured around development of

villages. This has become possible by presenting and discussing below mentioned issues in the Gramsabhas. The minutes of these discussions are to be recorded in the Gramsabha proceedings register.

The activities undertaken by the Gramsabha are listed here below.

- Report of activities undertaken by the Gram Panchayat since the last Gramsabha is presented and the resolutions and suggestions of the last Gramsabha and the action by the Panchayat there on.
- It is also informed of the taxes collected during the previous one year and pending cases and the details of water tax collected.
- The village accountant gives details of 'Birth and Deaths' if unregistered, for further action.
- Discussions are held about distribution of rations, old age pension, pension for handicapped etc., in Panchayat limits.
- The Gramsabha also discusses about problems of enrolment of all children in the schools, their attendance and development of schools in its jurisdiction.
- The Gramsabha also discusses about the hospitals and veterinary institutions and their activities. They educate the people about the precautions to be taken to protect the health and hygiene of people and cattle.
- The officers of the Panchayat give details of various plans and development activities undertaken, the expenditure incurred during the preceding year and the expenditure incurred by the committee in-charge of water supply and hygiene.
- Information regarding construction of toilets in the village and subsidy given for this purpose is to be presented.
- Anganwadi centers and their activities also are discussed in the Gramsabha.
- The lists of beneficiaries under various schemes are made after discussion.
- The Gramsabha discusses the activities and projects to be undertaken in

coming years.

- It can discuss any other issue considered important with the permission of the Chairman.
- Steps are taken in the Gramsabhas held during October/November, to identify programmes to be implemented on priority basis, from the resources of the Gram Panchayat and Taluka Panchayats in the next financial year. These programmes are community programmes and should help the comprehensive development of the village as a whole.
- Gramsabha is to be informed of the details of children admitted, not admitted, dropped out etc., in the primary, higher primary and secondary schools by the respective head teachers. The essential infrastructure requirements of these Schools will also be discussed.
- The Health officer of the primary health center of the Panchayat tool will attend the Gramsabha and brief the Gramsabha about the inoculation programmes, children suffering from malnutrition and precautionary steps to be taken against disease like Malaria, etc. The Gramsabha discusses about the services and facilities to be provided by the health centers.
- In addition to the activities of the Gram Panchayats, the Gramsabha can discuss issues related to Taluka Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat too. e.g. Requirements of primary and secondary schools, primary health centers, veterinary clinics, roads and other public works etc. the decisions and recommendations of the Gramsabha in this regard are to be forwarded to the Executive officer of the Taluka Panchayat by the Gram Panchayat after scrutiny within ten days.
- The Secretary of the Gram Panchayat will identify the public works to be under taken under the Panchayat grants and place it before the Gramsabha and get its approval for incorporating it into the plans of the Panchayat.
- The concerned Executive officers of the Taluka Panchayats (while finalizing the Taluka Panchayat Plans), places the recommendations of the Gramsabhas

for the consideration of the Taluka Panchayat. If these works cannot be included, due to any reason, the Gramsabha will be informed of the same. On the other hand if these are under the jurisdiction of the Zilla Panchayat the same will be brought to the Chief Executive officer of the Zilla Panchayat.

- The Executive officer of the Taluka Panchayat is expected to consolidate the entire proposals made by the Gramsabhas, which fall into the jurisdiction of the Zilla Panchayat within a week after the completion of the scheduled meetings of the Gramsabha.
- Normally the meetings of the Gramsabha are photographed or videographed. They are preserved in the Gram Panchayat for record and copies are sent to Taluka Panchayat Executive officer for information.
- Sometimes during the Gramsabha appropriate cultural activities are organized so as to create a festive ambience and create interest among the village population and there by ensure their greater involvement and participation.
- The government through its circular issued on 30th October 2007 has ordered observation of Rights of Children's Month every year during the month of November. It has also issued detailed guidelines including-objectives of children's Gramsabha, date for Gramsabha, the place, time and programmes to be organized and the responsibility of Panchayat Chairmen, member secretaries, executive officers and the nodal officers in this regard.

As per these guidelines the children's Gramsabha are to be organized and should be utilized to protect the rights of children and find solutions to their problems and concerns.

Organizing Gramsabha is the joint responsibility of people's representatives and the government officers. The Law gives high priority to it, but to make it effective and there by realize Gandhiji's dream of Gram Swaraj, the people's representative's and officers concerned have to show sincerity. For this they have to create awareness among villagers about the need to get involved in the activities of Gramsabha.

Gramsabhas are a forum for people's participation in governance. It provides

opportunity to the rural people to get involved in the development programmes of their locality and also make the administration transparent. In the background of these factors it is the responsibility of elected representatives, officers and voters to see that the Gramsabhas function as per the rules and expectations of the Panchayat Raj Act.

CONCLUSION

Since ancient times Gramsabhas had a predominant role in the Indian administrative structure. The presence of such democratic institutions indicates a highly evolved system of governance. Gramsabhas are wonderful example for the working of direct democracy.

The present day Gramsabhas prove the principle of the decentralization that “the power of governance should be transferred such that every level of administration should get such powers which it is capable of discharging effectively.” Constitutionally too the Gramsabhas have a lion share in dispensing social, economic, political and personal freedoms to the citizen. They are not just the guardians of the civic rights but also the sentinels of the fundamental duties. The very idea of Gramsabha is a matter of confidence and by extending support to it and getting actively involved in its functions the goal of rural development may be realized.

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