

DYNAMICS OF PANCHAYAT MEETINGS

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Panchayati Raj System was launched on 2nd October 1959 to institutionalize people's participation in the development process. Unfortunately, barring initial success, panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) could not achieve much. Many factors contributed to their failure. One major factor was that panchayat meetings were not held regularly and whenever held, they were dominated by socio-economically powerful people. This resulted in little or no participation of poorer sections in panchayat activities. Thus, poor people were marginalized and panchayats became the stronghold of rural elites.

Realising the significance of PRIs for equitable development, 73rd Constitutional (Amendment) Act was passed with the novel purpose of making PRIs a viable institution of local self governance. This Act intends to revitalize the PRIs by encouraging and ensuring active participation of all sections of rural society in the development process and making PRIs a forum of need-based self-reliant development. Keeping this background in view, this study was undertaken to diagnose the dynamics of panchayat meetings. Major focus of the study was on

attendance of panchayat representatives in meetings, major issues discussed, nature of participation and pattern of interaction of different sections in panchayat meetings.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in one district each of Rajasthan (Dist. Alwar) and Haryana (Dist. Gurgaon) states. Total one meeting each of two Panchayat Samitis (Kishangarh Bass and Gurgaon, respectively) and four Gram Panchayats, was observed in a non-participant observation made. No Zila Parishad meeting could be observed as permission was not granted for the same. To facilitate observation and keep it focussed on major issues, a guideline was prepared. However, the observation was not restricted to the guideline, rather it was approached with sufficient flexibility to give attention to events and views emerging during the meeting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Attendance in Panchayat Meetings—It is clear from the table 1 that in both districts, three-fourth of the total representatives were present in Panchayat Samiti meetings, while in Gram

Table 1. Attendance in Panchayat Meetings

Type of attendance	Alwar						Gurgaon					
	Gram Panchayat			Panchayat Samiti			Gram Panchayat			Panchayati Samiti		
	Men N=21	Women N=10	Total N=31	Men N=19	Women N=9	Total N=28	Men N=12	Women N=6	Total N=18	Men N=17	Women N=8	Total N=25
1. Attended	15(71.4)*	5(50)	20(64.5)	15(79)	6(66.6)	21(75)	8(66.6)	3(50)	11(61)	14(82)	6(75)	20(80)
2. Expressed views	10(66.6)**	2(40)	12(60)	10(66.6)	3(50)	13(62)	6(75)	1(33.3)	7(63.6)	11(78.5)	6(66.6)	15(75)
3. Did not expressed views	5(33.3)**	3(60)	8(40)	5(33.3)	3(50)	8(38)	2(25)	2(66.6)	4(36.3)	3(21.5)	2(33.3)	5(25)

* Figure shown in parentheses indicates percentage of the frequency to the concerned 'N'

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Panchayats attendance was little less. Attendance of women members was less than their male counterparts, particularly in Gram Panchayats half of the women members were absent. Table 1 further reveals that more than 60 percent panchayat representatives expressed their views in meetings but very few women members at Gram Panchayat level expressed their views. It may be due to the fact that in these areas, 'Purdah-pratha' is still prevalent there fore, women hesitate to speak in front of senior male members of their village whereas at Panchayat Samiti level, representatives belong to comparatively distant villages. Therefore, women were less hesitant at Panchayat Samiti level.

Major Issues discussed in Panchayat Meetings— Table 2 shows that in both the districts some issues were discussed with similar priority in Gram Panchayats as well as Panchayat Samitis. These issues are: new proposals for development work, government's development schemes, related

guidelines and orders, and review of the development work being undertaken by panchayat. However, on some issues priority of Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis was different. In both districts, financial matters gained top priority in Panchayat Samitis whereas in Gram Panchayats, problems experienced in executing development activities were given more significance. It is obvious because Gram Panchayats are the ultimate institution who executes development activities. Another interesting fact is that the issue of relationships among panchayat representatives occupied prominence in Panchayat Samiti meetings but not in Gram Panchayats. Perhaps it is due to the fact that, as mentioned earlier, responsibility for actual implementation of development activities lies with Gram Panchayat. The role of Panchayat Samiti members is largely advisory in nature. Therefore, they feel neglected and bypassed by the Sarpanch of their area.

Table 2. Issues discussed in Panchayat Meetings

Issues	Alwar				Gurgaon			
	Gram Panchayat		Panchayat Samiti		Gram Panchayat		Panchayat Samiti	
	No. of people	Rank	No. of people	Rank	No. of people	Rank	No. of people	Rank
	participated		participated		participated		participated	
1. Review of the work done	6	V	5	IV	4	IV	5	V
2. Financial matters	5	IV	10	I	4	IV	12	I
3. New development proposals	8	I	8	II	6	II	10	II
4. Govt. Schemes/ Guidelines	6	III	5	IV	5	III	6	IV
5. Social conflict	0	-	4	V	0		3	VI
5. Mutual relations among panchayat representatives	2	VI	8	II	0		8	III
7. Relations between officials and representatives	0		6	III	3	V	5	V
8. Problems perceived in execution of development work	7	II	3	VI	7	I	2	V

Nature of Participation of Different Social Groups—Data shown in table 3 reveal that majority of the weaker section members and women members expressed their views in request/ demand

form. However, at Panchayat Samiti level few assertive members from these sections also alleged that they are being neglected. It shows that at Panchayat Samiti level, members of weaker

sections were assertive as compared to their counterparts at the Gram Panchayat level. Majority of the socio-economically-powerful sections put their views in the form of criticism and suggestions. Few common people from poor

sections also attended Gram Panchayat meetings. They came with the purpose of securing some benefits from government's schemes. They presented their case to the panchayat representative and the secretary in request form.

Table 3. Nature of participation of different social groups in Panchayat Meetings

Mode of participation	Alwar				Gurgaon			
	Gram Panchayat		Panchayat Samiti		Gram Panchayat		Panchayat Samiti	
	No. of people who expressed views	View expressed by	No. of people who expressed views	Views expressed by	No. of people who expressed views	Views expressed by	No. of people who expressed views	Views expressed by
Opinion/suggestion	8	Panchayat members, Sarpanch and Secretary	12	Majority	7	Majority	14	Majority
Demand	6	Weaker section members and women members	9	Majority	4	Weaker section members and women members	10	High caste members, women members and weaker section members
Criticism	4	High caste members and other assertive members	8	High caste members and other assertive members	0	-	10	High caste members, women members and weaker section members
Complaint	0		8	Weaker section members and women members	0	-	8	High caste members, women members and weaker section members
Request	4	Poor villagers with the intention of getting benefits	0	-	3	Poor villagers with the intention of getting benefits	0	-
Decision	4	Sarpanch and Secretary	2	Pradhan and BDO	4	Sarpanch and Secretary	2	Chairman and BDO

Patterns of Interaction- Following major patterns of interaction emerged during discussions :

- ◆ Though, as table 3 shows, considerable number of weaker section members and women

members expressed their views, Gram Panchayat meetings were dominated by Sarpanch and Secretary. They used to convince these members by manipulating them politely. At times Sarpanches avoided demands of these

members. Yet, conflict did not occur in Gram Panchayat meetings because weaker section members and women members accepted the dominance of Sarpanch and Secretary. Sarpanch and Secretary also showed tendency to patronize the requests of poor people. They behaved in 'Godfather like style'.

- ❖ In Panchayat Samiti meetings, situation was slightly different. Here Pradhan/ Chairman/ Vice-Chairman dominated the meeting. They clearly showed the tendency to favour views of few members more than the others. They also repeatedly tried to avoid or manipulate the views of weaker section members and women members.
- ❖ In Panchayat Samiti meetings, Block Development Officers (BDOs) were less dominant than what the Secretaries were in Gram Panchayat meetings.
- ❖ At few times conflict emerged in Panchayat Samiti meetings between some assertive weaker section members and women members, and Pradhan/ Chairman/ Vice-Chairman. In Gurgaon Panchayat Samiti, women members actively supported each other's views.
- ❖ After discussion, Sarpanch and Secretary in Gram Panchayats whereas Pradhan/ Chairman/ Vice-Chairman and BDOs in Panchayat Samitis took the decisions and announced it to the members. However, by the time decisions were taken atmosphere, particularly in Panchayat Samitis, became diffused. It appeared that, though majority of members expressed their views, yet, due to group loyalties and their proximity to the Pradhan/ Chairman/ Vice-Chairman and BDOs, members were clear as to whose views will be given priority in making decisions.

CONCLUSION

1. This study clearly indicates that participation of women members at Gram Panchayat level was, at best, passive. This supports the doubts expressed about women that they may prove members for the namesake. Though it will take time before women become active partners in Gram Panchayats in these areas, yet, some intervention is called for. Sincere educational programmes aimed

at creating awareness about their importance in development among rural women could be helpful.

2. It is good to note that many new proposals for development work were discussed in panchayat meetings. It shows representative's concern for the development of their area. However, some other important issues like those related to eliciting peoples' participation in development activities, mobilising collective energy for common good, etc, were not given any attention. It appeared that panchayat representatives were only concerned with getting maximum assistance from government system. This is not a healthy sign for panchayat's progress as an institution of self-reliant development, rather this tendency would contribute towards perpetuating the 'dependency culture' that has gripped our rural society over decades.

3. The situation in Gram Panchayat meetings under the dominance of Sarpanch and Secretary, appeared status-quo oriented. Members of weaker sections and women members were not assertive enough to get their views across effectively.

4. At Panchayat Samiti level, the situation was such as can be expected in a transitory phase. Earlier panchayats were dominated by powerful people but now weaker section members are also asserting for their share in the development process. Therefore, some conflict is obvious. This is an encouraging sign for equitable development.

5. Though heads of panchayat institutions (Sarpanch, Pradhans, etc.) are supposed to be true representatives of the people. However, it emerged in this study that, at least in the panchayats studied, behaviour of these panchayat heads was contrary to expectations. They appeared more concerned with increasing their influence and fulfill their political and psychological ambition of power possession than with the development of their area. Their behavior was that of a true power elite. If their tendency to give preference to group loyalties, instead of promoting participation of all members, continues, it will seriously jeopardize our chances of realising the dream of new Panchayati Raj System.

