ROLE OF GRAM PANCHAYATS IN INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF MARGINALIZED SECTIONS IN INDIA

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Background of the Study

Economic and social inequalities are interlinked. The power structure is concentrated in the hands of the dominant castes, and people with political or muscle power. They dominate the activities of the village as well as their own community. These people control the flow of resources and technology coming from outside, and appropriate all the benefits meant for the weaker sections. The lower castes face constant discrimination in their day to day life. Among them the women are worst victims. Without any asset base, and several social disabilities, they are unable to sustain any economic activity, and have to depend on others for means of livelihood. Consequently, they are exploited, and live at subsistence levels without any savings.

The deprived and disadvantaged section of the society constitutes a group of people who were denied the opportunities to fully explore and utilize its abilities and thus enjoy a quality life. In the Indian context, the disadvantaged sections constitute SCs, STs, OBCs, and minorities of Muslim and Christian religions. Further specifically to state that, the groups of people like destitute women, differently able, resource less and poorest of the poor are facing still worse social and economic problems in the society. Empowerment of Socially Disadvantaged Groups continues to be on the priority list of country’s developmental agenda, as they still lagging behind by comparing to the rest of the society due to their social and economic backwardness. Their share in the country’s total population is quite substantial, as SCs account for 17.5 per cent and Minorities representing 18.4 per cent. The marginalized groups who occupy weak positions in social and economic hierarchy have also found themselves weak even within the local governments. While the representation of weaker sections is officially sought through affirmative action, in the actual practices that take place within the institutions, they are subjected to multiple types of discrimination and exclusion.

In India, Local Governance Institutions, called ‘Panchayats’, in rural areas were given importance through 73rd constitutional amendment (PRI Act) which came into force from 24th April 1992 to give constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions at the district and below. These institutions are responsible for ensuring economic development and social justice to the rural people. It is evident that, one third of seats in panchayats are reserved for marginalized groups i.e. women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes to ensure their membership and participation in matters pertaining to local governance and development. Even though, many schemes focusing all categories, majority has special provisions for disadvantaged sections with reservation of some
package of services as mandatory for them. If all
these schemes were properly implemented and
ensured reaching of the needy would have reduced
the major problems associated with poverty in the
rural areas. The present study examined the
development opportunities available for
disadvantaged sections implemented through GP
and to verify the level of awareness among
disadvantaged sections on the schemes, and their
rights. It also tries to study the nature of
participation of these groups in decision making
process of local governance for planning and
implementation towards strengthening the
livelihoods of poorest of the poor as well as overall
development of the panchayat.

Statement of the Problem

The recent planned development strategies
have given special focus to involve marginalized
people in the mainstream of development through
various initiatives by the central and state
governments. The strategies are aiming to empower
them by providing special provisions to participate
in decision making process of local governance in
planning and implementation of development
schemes and to avail opportunities like wage
employment, skill development for self-
employment, access and use of basic amenities as
well as individual needs, basic education and health
care services to improve their socio-economic
conditions. In order to involve excluded sections,
central government has been made many vital steps
through constitutional provisions for strengthening
the Gram Panchayats as bottom most planning and
delivery mechanism by devolution of powers and
functions. But, in reality many cases, Gram
Panchayats are deprived of resources due to
incapable leadership or influence of the local power
structure or political hindrances, on the other hand
due to lack of good leadership.

I. Objectives

1. To examine the Gram Panchayat initiatives for
the development of marginalized sections.
2. To understand the process of participatory
planning and level of participation by
disadvantaged people.
3. To study the impact of major RD programmes
implemented through Panchayat on the
improvement of Socio-economic status of the
marginalized section.
4. To identify the factors contributed for
inclusion and exclusion of different sections of
the people.

Methodology

This study was conducted in four states
namely Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Tamil
Nadu and Karnataka. These four states were
selected based on the effectiveness of decentralized
governance and devolution of powers and functions
by the state governments. For the purpose of
comparison, in each state two better performing
panchayats were selected having population of
multi-communities. The study conducted in 8 better
performing Gram Panchayats. The GPs were
selected by using few important criterions like
utilization of earmarked funds, revenue collection,
creation of infrastructure like water supply,
sanitation, education, connectivity, street lighting,
generation of employment through employment
guarantee scheme, received awards, etc. In each
GP, 10% of the marginalized households were
selected as sample respondents. The sample units
were covered among different category of
marginalized sections namely SC/ST, MBC,
Minorities, Women headed poor households,
physically challenged. Semi-structured interview
schedule was prepared and administered covering
the aspects like awareness level, participation in
planning and implementation, factors contributed
and benefitted for availing or not availing the
schemes benefits through various opportunities. Focus Group Discussions (FGD), observation techniques were also used to collect adequate data from the selected respondents to understand the overall performance and responsibility of the GP and also identified the functional difficulties.

**Major Findings of the Study**

- The study covered marginalised sections benefitted under different rural development schemes with the sample of 947 respondents, 52.3% are males and remaining 47.7% are females. High majority of 72.0 per cent belonging to the Hindu religion, 11.8 per cent belong to Christianity and the remaining 11.8 per cent belong to the Islam religion.

- Over all study responses show that, 37.5 per cent respondents are illiterates. Among the literates, 38.1 per cent have attended school only up to primary level. Majority, more than 65 percent belong to agriculture labours and receives annual income of between Rs. 20001 – 30000 and spend the earned income for consumption purpose. There were 40.0 percent respondents are landless. Among the land holders, around 40% households received lands under government land free distribution.

- Around 57 percent households have got financial assistances from the government with the facilitation of Gram Panchayats. Supply of drinking water is adequate through various sources. It is observed, 91.8 per cent of households have toilets. This study show encouraging trend that, 94.7 per cent households reported they are using toilets regularly. There are 97.5% of the habitations having drainage facility.

- Although the general performance of panchayats in promoting inclusive development has not been impressive, there are some cases where they have taken initiatives to ensure better service delivery or promote development in a systematic manner.

- Regarding the initiatives taken for socio-economic development and other aspects of the life of the poor by the panchayats, majority people (65.2%) benefitted under health programmes, 56.2% respondents were benefitted through the activities related to the improvement in the agriculture supporting infrastructures, 54.8 are availing the educational initiatives undertaken by the panchayats.

- Similarly, 46.4 households among marginalised sections receive employment with the facilitation of the GPs, further around 40% respondents reported that, they have got benefits under socio-economic initiatives.

- More than 90 percent households reported in all the study states, the gram sabha meetings had quorum. The panchayats made efforts to mobilise one third representation of women, and their mandatory quorum in Gram Sabha meetings.

- The status of awareness on the conduct of gram sabha and effective methods of communication about the conduct of the meetings, only 15.4% have awareness about the communication of the GS meetings. Only around 20 percent people participate in the meetings and planning process of the panchayat.

- Prevalence of patriarchal dominance of the decisions and women remain at the periphery. In reality in most of the villages, women and lower caste men would not come to this meeting unless they are prompted to come. Even if they come, they sit in one corner and would not raise their voice unless supported to do so.
Lack of personal interest for the people for participation in the meetings yields less attendance, it was reported by 78.6%. Similarly lack of awareness on the functioning of GP (84.6%) for the people hurdles the people’s participation.

Negligence of GPs as reported by 77.9% respondents, the panchayats put less effort to communicate the purpose of the meetings. Therefore, people are not aware about the dates and purposes of the meetings which lead less percentage of attendance.

The status of marginalised people’s representation in the GP committees shows poor, only 5% were selected as members of various committees. Social mobilization is the cornerstone of participatory approaches in rural development and poverty alleviation programmes. Majority reveals that the meeting information sent to the ward members through written notice and communication through mobile phone and display of information in the panchayat notice board are the prominent methods.

Regarding nature of participation in gram sabha meetings, around 21% participate with involvement by discussing in detail about the various activities of the GP, especially implementation of State and Central Government welfare and development schemes.

Around 50% of women respondents and equal percentage of SC&STs including poorest of the poor, in general not only for the GS meetings, public appearance and participation is very meager.

Reason for non-participation are, social stigma among women specifically Muslim women, low social status under caste hierarchy prevents them to participate in the public events.

Even successful gram panchayats also fail to get real participation of certain section of the people excluded historically. Partial participation was reported by 50.5% overall highest in West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh.

The people participate in the planning process through a number of forums like community forums (54.0%) SHGs (21.6%), political party (11.6%) and members of panchayat committees (6.3%), NGO motivated members or facilitators are also show importance in participation of the panchayat activities (22.9%). In addition, individual on their own also participate occasionally, from this study panchayat 52.2% respondents reported, they participated on their own interest without any external intervention.

The suppression of the elite community and rich people continue to dominate and exploit both low caste elected members and poor people. Transparency is an important element of good governance where lack of awareness hinder the process of pro-disclosure and demand of disclosure of documents and performances.

More than 50% of the sample respondents did not aware and not interested in knowing the importance of the Gram panchayats and their role play.

Majority of the respondents benefitted under common facility services like drinking water and sanitation, road connectivity, health, education, mid day meal scheme, etc. Other individual benefits schemes are concerned only less percentage of families only benefited due to mismatch of supply and demand.
Field Observations

- All the GPs in the study regions improved the performance level due to the effective people’s participation which enable to maintaining transparency and accountability in delivering services like provision of drinking water, street light, electricity, connectivity, housing for houseless, education for all, anganwadi for the young children, public distribution system, access of market, maintenance of burial ground, provision of employment, selection of beneficiaries under various welfare schemes, etc.

- Many award winning panchayats by default developed infrastructures and delivered better services till the period of getting Awards. But later few panchayats sustained and created self reliance, which further gained a number of incentives in the form of funds and people support. But few panchayats could not able to sustained or survive, hence poor in delivery of quality services. Rich and better off people reap the benefits from the service providers but poor illiterate still live in the periphery of the poverty and under the clutches of the communal hierarchy.

- Exclusion is seen as the processes by which individuals and population groups face barriers in relation to their access to public goods, resulting in inequitable social attainments, capabilities, development, justice and dignity outcomes.

- The evidences from this study, related to different of type of exclusions resulted in low income led poverty, lower community status, illiteracy, belonging to a particular political party or apolitical in nature. These factors continue to make vulnerable to all kinds of atrocities and vanish the feeling of emancipation against suppression.

- The major interventions in addition to the delivery and maintenance of the structures of the basic needs, the panchayats implements major employment scheme like MGNREGS, the contribution of this scheme has been made improvement in terms of increased income, women empowerment, mobility of women, holding bank accounts, credit worthiness, asset creation and ultimately improving the economic life of the marginalised sections in the study areas.

- Panchayats facilitation of another scheme called NRLM also equally contributed for social and economic life of the poor family through women self help adventures. The PMAY has created permanent housing to a number of families which created social recognition to these sections of people. PMGSY increased the connectivity and people have easy access to the market and other health facilities.

- Swatch Bharath has brought appreciable changes on sanitation behaviour of the people. Other individual pension schemes provide life protection for the senior citizens. Maintaining rural infrastructures supports many dimensions of the life of poor people. Even then, careless exclusions of certain section of the people lead to problems in accessing the services, schemes and infrastructures created by the governing institutions. Ignorance and lack of awareness on the part of poor people also hinder the access of the services created for them.

- Another equally important change that witnessed in the rural scene after poverty alleviation or rural development programs are that the poor people who never had any voice in the functioning of the village institutions. Now they are taking active part in these village institutions.
II. SUGGESTIONS

- Conducive environment for educating the poor children is inevitable for the government. Inclusive education “is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners.

- The study reflects many people have not enrolled under MGNREGS, effort must be initiated to cover all the families of the marginalised sections. It was observed majority families have received minimum days of employment due to various technical issues from GP, it has to be looked seriously to provide prescribed days of employment to support income of the families.

- Action towards creating full employment or creating atmosphere for self-employment or adequately remunerated work is an effective method of addressing poverty and promoting social integration and social inclusion. Employment also acts as a source of identity and gives access to a social network.

- The provision of productive employment, especially rural non-farm employment, and access to productive assets, for instance, land, are critical, not only to lift the poor out of the poverty trap, but to also provide a stimulus to growth, as stable incomes can enlarge the purchasing power of the poor and enlarge the size of the domestic market.

- The lands allotted to the weaker sections are barren or not suitable for cultivation. Priority must be given by the panchayats to guide and facilitate the poor farmers to benefit under different schemes like WDC- PMKSY, RKVY, Horticulture mission and SC&ST corporation to develop their lands which will increase the economic status.

- The major finding of the study revolves around lack of participation or less motivation to participate in the grassroot democracy and its development initiatives. It is a major hurdle for their betterment. To create and sustain inclusive societies, it is critical that all members of society are able and motivated to participate in civic, social, economic and political activities, both at the local and national levels.

- To be inclusive is a core value of democratic governance, in terms of equal participation, equal treatment and equal rights before the law. This implies that all people – including the poor, women, ethnic and religious minorities, indigenous peoples and other disadvantaged groups – have the right to participate meaningfully in governance processes and influence decisions that affect them.

- Lack of awareness and ignorance are other important lacunae hinder the participation which are to be checked with the help of locally working NGOs by creating community based organisations and civil societies. The existence of a strong civil society is fundamental for active participation and making public policies and institutions accountable. There must be freedom for people to express diverse views and develop unconventional unique ideas.

- As long as both the advantaged and disadvantaged have equal access to or benefit from these public facilities and services, they will all feel less burdened by their differences in socio-economic status, thus alleviating a possible sense of exclusion or frustration is essential at present. Communal harmony and eliminating inequalities in all forms will lead to happy and peaceful society.

- Equal access to public information plays an important role in creating an inclusive society.
Information that pertains to the society, such as what a community owns, generates, or benefits from, should be made available to all. Awareness on RTI act has to be given priority.

- Collective participation, through accepted representations of all classes and backgrounds, in the planning, implementation and evaluation of community activities should be sought after.
- Social inclusion of the excluded groups can only happen if everyone becomes “part of the group” that defines the culture, values and standards of the society in which they live. Actions can be used towards this purpose include education, dialogue and public awareness campaigns.
- Effective local governance is key to promoting social inclusion and combating social exclusion, as it improves access to basic services, mobilizes human and financial resources, and strengthens social and human capital. Likewise, broad-based participation, contributes to good local governance, to fostering transparency, accountability, legitimacy and to making quality decisions.
- The leaders of the marginalised sections particularly elected members of the PRIs have to be sensitized towards their roles and responsibilities in the democratic institutions towards safeguarding their people rights. Effective leadership is crucial to the development of an inclusive society.

III. CONCLUSION

Strengthening greater access to various Elements of Inclusion i.e. Access to clean and safe places for living, work and recreation - Access to information and communication - Access to public spaces - Access to resources - Access to basic services, including education, health care, clean water and sanitation - Access to transportation - Transparent and accountable decision-making processes - Adequate income and employment opportunities - Affirmation of human rights - Opportunity for personal development - Respect for diversity - Freedom (of choice, religion, etc. Participation in decision making is vital. Economic assets are essential if the marginalised are to move beyond exclusion. Local social service organisations to be encouraged to partner with the GP work against physical discrimination and protect the rights of the differently challenged. In this line, the panchayats have vital role in economic development of the marginalized sections with the opportunities available under the powers of the panchayats. It is to be appreciated that, due the enthusiastic leadership by the elected representatives in many states, the panchayats have achieved inclusive development. But in majority cases, the panchayats have to go long way to achieve social justice and reduce inequality.