CHAPTER-V

WORKING OF GRAMA SABHAS IN MUSIRI BLOCK

Grama Sabha shall be conducted in such a way that intervening period between two Grama Sabha meetings shall not exceed more than six months. However, the Government of Tamil Nadu have issued instructions to conduct Grama Sabha meeting at least on four important days on

- 26th January
- 1st May
- 15th August and
- 2nd October.

Grama sabha was made effective by amending the Act suitably to reduce the quorum from 1/3rd of electors to 1/10th of electors in the Village Panchayat.¹

Panchayat Meetings:

Ordinarily the president shall put the amendment to the vote in the order in which they have been moved and lastly the original motion, if the amendments are lost. But it shall be in his discretion in any case to put the vote original motion and the amendments as the president thinks fit. On any resolution if several points have been discussed, it shall be in the discretion of the president to divide the resolution into points and put each of such points separately to the voters. No discussion shall be

¹ Available at http://www.rural.tn.gov.in PRI-statutory institution.Grama Sabha.
permitted on a motion for leave to withdraw except with the permission of the president.\(^2\)

Every resolution which has been moved shall be seconded. Otherwise it shall not be discussed. It has been specifically mentioned in Government Order 1961.\(^3\)

Every Panchayat could move of resolutions meeting annually two times.\(^4\) In some Panchayat, moving of resolution meeting in yearly four times Gram Sabha meeting and monthly meeting was also mandatory. All Panchayat members are supposed to attend the meetings. The Panchayat president would head by the meeting. If he does not attend the meeting, Union Officer would hold the meeting.

In the meeting, resolutions to pass on rural developments, budget, health and sanitation programmes and problems in the administration are discussed. There are three types of meetings:

1. Ordinary meetings
2. Special meetings
3. Obligation meetings.

It is in Grama Sabha platforms that the proposals for development programmes are initiated based on people’s needs and interests. People are empowered to raise in the Grama Sabha meetings any question within the items listed in the XI Schedule of the 73\(^{rd}\) Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992.\(^5\) Similarly, the Grama Panchayat has to see that people are given opportunities to raise such issues in the Grama Sabha

\(^2\) Palanithurai.G., _TamilNadu Panchayat three tier system_ (Chennai, , 2004), p.76.


\(^5\) Shukla, J.D., _State and District Administration in India_, Indian Institute of Public Administration (New Delhi, 1976), p. 29.
meetings. Responsiveness of the Grama Sabha consists in its exercise of the rights, carrying out its functions, fulfilling its responsibilities and abiding by its duties—all for the benefit of the people. Grama Sabhas should make plans for the development of the people and implement them in the areas prescribed in the XI Schedule. While real democracy decentralization and good governance together jointly demand institutional responsiveness, devolution of powers to the grass roots aimed at strengthening democracy and making the governance effective, transparent, accountable and ultimately responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people.

**Grama Sabha as People’s Platform for Participation:**

Grama Sabha has been granted constitutional status since the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. It is the only body in the newly created tiers of PRIs, which provides the citizens a space and opportunity to participate in matters, which concern their lives. The Constitutional Amendment Act defines Gram Sabha as a “body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level” (Article 243). “Village” means a village specified by the Governor by public notification to be a village for the purposes of this Part and includes a group of villages so specified” [Article 243(g)]. Therefore, Grama Sabha of a particular village refers to “All persons whose names are included in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of a Village Panchayat” [Section 3 (3)]. It is the village assembly of voters. An institution is made synonymous with its members who are the voters in a constituency. This is a revolutionary concept demanding a total commitment to responsive governance.
Grama Sabhas are envisaged in the Musiri block, as people’s platform for reflecting, individually and collectively, their needs, wishes, aspirations, suggestions, plans and solutions to individual and collective problems existing in the village level. “Grama Sabha are envisaged as a form of direct democracy where people are given a chance not only in electing their representatives but also in discussing, deciding and participating in the developmental activities of the Panchayat” The elected representative of a particular constituency is the convener of the respective Grama Sabha and in his ability to perform the functions, the Panchayat President may appoint a member representing any adjacent constituency as the convener [Section 3(4)].

Every meeting of Grama Sabha shall be presided over by the president of the Village Panchayat or in his absence, the Vice-President, or in the absence of both of them by the convener of the Grama Sabha [Section 3(5)]

The Village Panchayat shall place before the Grama Sabha (i) a report relating to the developmental programmes relating to the constituency during the previous year and these that are proposed to be undertaken during the current year, (ii) their expenditure, (iii) the annual statement of accounts and (iv) the administration report of the preceding year. The Grama Sabha shall, in its ordinary meeting or in a special meeting convened for the purpose, discuss the report referred to in sub-section (6) of Section 3 and it shall have the right to know about the budgetary provisions, the details of plan outlay, item wise allocation of funds and details of the estimates and cost of materials of works executed or proposed to be executed within the area of the Grama Sabha [3A(2)].
When beneficiaries are to be selected according to any scheme, project or plan, the criterion for eligibility and order of priority shall be fixed by the Panchayat subject to the terms and conditions prescribed in the scheme, project or plan and such criterion shall be published in the manner prescribed and intimated to the Grama Sabha[3A(8)]. The priority list prepared by Grama Panchayat after inviting applications for the selection of beneficiaries and conducting inquiries on the application received, shall be scrutinized at the meeting of the Gramma Sabha in which the applicants are also invited and final list of the deserving beneficiaries, in the order of priority, shall be prepared and sent for the approval of the Grama Panchayat. The Village Panchayat has no power to change the order of priority in the list sent by the Grama Sabha for approval [3A (9)].

**Responsibilities of Grama Sabha:**

The Act provides that the Grama Sabha has responsibilities [3B (1)] to participate in and disseminate information regarding developmental and welfare activities in the sectors of health and literacy, environmental cleanliness, etc. The status of Grama Sabhas in Musiri block has been enhanced through the amendments made by the Act 13 of 1999. Though the formal and ultimate authority to take decisions on the matters concerning subjects discussed in the Grama Sabha is the Village Panchayat, Grama Sabha has ample scope to participate meaningfully in the local governance. Scope of participation is widened to involve the voter in the process of need assessment, formulation of development programmes, monitoring and assessment. The voter is empowered through Grama Sabha to involve in the social audit and performance audit where by he can question, ask for clarifications and
criticize the officers as well as the elected representatives. Regarding the selection of beneficiaries for the beneficiary-oriented schemes, Grama Sabha is in effect placed above the Village Panchayat in the sense that Village Panchayat is not to change even the priority in the list prepared by the Grama Sabha.

In order to understand to what extent the Grama Sabhas in Musiri block responded to the needs of the local people by providing a platform to discuss the twenty nine subjects included in the eleventh schedule, a review was made of the recorded and available minutes of 32 Grama Panchayats identified from the four distinct areas of the District. The minutes covered a period of 5 years from 1996-2001. The inferences of the paper are totally based on these data. The reviewing exercise involved an examination of recorded minutes of 160 Grama Sabha meetings.

Table No.1

Average Number of Subjects discussed in Sample Grama Sabhas (GS).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the Grama Panchayat</th>
<th>Average Number of subjects discussed in GS meetings</th>
<th>Number of GS meetings considered</th>
<th>Period during which the GS meetings were held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Evoor</td>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26.01.1996 26.01.2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Gunaseelam</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>01.05.1992 01.05.2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Ayyampalayam</td>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>02.10.1995 02.10.2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Vellur</td>
<td>8-9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15.08.1995 15.08.2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>32 wards in 4 GPs</strong></td>
<td><strong>6-7</strong></td>
<td><strong>160</strong></td>
<td><strong>8 Years.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Source: Minutes Books available with the concerned Grama Panchayats.

The Table No.1 shows that in the sample wards of the sample Grama Panchayats, only six to seven subjects (22.55%), on an average, came for discussion out of 29 subjects, during the meetings of Grama Sabhas held during a period of five years. This means that more than three forth of the intervention areas are left out of focus by Grama Sabhas. Vellur, a Grama Panchayat having a majority of mat workers living in abject poverty and backwardness brought an average number of eight to nine subjects for discussion in the Grama Sabha meetings.

The second attempt was to understand the frequency at which these subjects came for discussions in the Grama Sabha meetings. For the sake of easier and simpler analysis, the subjects were categorized as (i) most favoured or most frequently debated, (ii) favoured or debated to an extent and (iii) least favoured or least frequently debated in respect of their appearance in recorded minute books. Subjects which came for discussion at least 5 times and above belonged to the first category; subjects which came for discussion between 2 times and less than 5 times belonged to the second category, while the rest coming for discussion less than 2 times belonged to the third.

The minutes collected from the Evoor Grama Panchayat reveal that none of the 29 subjects came for discussion five times, on an average, in Grama Sabha meetings in four sample villages during the reporting period of three years. An average of seven subjects was discussed a few times while the remaining 22 subjects were considered very rarely for implementation of programmes relating to those sectors. Gunaseelam
Panchayat gives a picture of six subjects discussed more than five times during the eight years. 10 subjects were deliberated a few times and 13 subjects were very rarely discussed.

Four Grama Sabhas in Musiri block in Tiruchirappalli District took up nine subjects for discussion more than five times during the eight years under review. Nine subjects came for discussions a few times during the period, while 11 subjects received attention very rarely. Vellur Grama Panchat considered only 1 subject more than 5 times during the three years.

Table No. 2

Frequency of subjects coming for Discussion in the Sample GS in Musiri Block

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Grama Panchayat</th>
<th>Number of subjects most favoured or most frequently debated</th>
<th>Number of subjects favoured or debated to an extent</th>
<th>Number of least favoured or least frequently subjects debated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evoor</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gunaseelam</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayyampalayam</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vellur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Minutes Books available with the concerned Grama Panchayats.

Thirteen subjects are found to be discussed between two and less than five times. Fifteen subjects rarely came for any kind of discussion (Table No.2)

This indicates that a small portion of the concerns of the people received the attention in the Grama Sabha meetings, which have the mandate to plan and propose programmes for ratification by the Grama Panchayat.
Minimum Response and Identified Areas of Intervention:

The next objective of the study was to identify the subjects who received comparatively better consideration in Grama Sabha meetings and those subjects which never came for discussions. In Gunaseelam Grama Panchayat, subjects which received some kind of focus are Agriculture, including agricultural extension, Rural housing, Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries, Women and child development, Welfare of the weaker sections, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and Maintenance of community assets. In Ayyampalayam Grama Panchayat, the list includes Agriculture, including agricultural extension, Social forestry and farm forest. Small scale industries, including food processing industries, Rural housing, Drinking water, Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways and other means of communication, Health and sanitation; including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries, Women and child development, Welfare of the weaker sections, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes. Vellur Grama Panchayat gave a higher attention to only one subject leaving the rest to be considered secondly and thirdly. The most favoured subject is health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries.

Not even a subject was discussed consistently in all the sample villages in the four Grama Panchayats. As shown in Table No.3, health and sanitation is the most widely discussed subject, that is, in three Grama Panchayats, ten subjects were found to have some priority for discussion and six subjects were totally neglected. Most of the neglected subjects are very much dear to environment and these points to the level of enthusiasm among the leadership of Grama Sabhas in a subject most important for
sustainable development. Through the subjects taken up are important, not all the important subjects are given proper place in discussions in the Grama Sabhas. We find an absence of consistent interest even in sectors in which the local people’s stake is high.

Table No.3

**Level of Favour shown by Grama Sabha**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most favoured subjects</th>
<th>Favoured to a certain extent</th>
<th>Least favoured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health and sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries.</td>
<td>Agriculture, including agricultural extension</td>
<td>Social forestry and farm forestry, minor forest produce, fuel and fodder, Non-conventional energy sources, adult and non-formal education, Public Distribution system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social forestry and farm forestry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small-scale industries, including mat industries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural housing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drinking water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways and other means of communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women and child development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Welfare of the weaker sections, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintenance of Community assets.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, though majority population of the sample villages in Vellur Grama Panchayat are mat workers, problems related to mat were not given top priority in the Grama Sabha meetings.

**Neglect of Subjects:**

It is noted that certain subjects never came for consideration in Grama Sabha meetings. Evoor minutes reveal that four subjects were not at all discussed in the
sample Grama Sabha meetings. They are social forestry and farm forestry, fuel and fodder, non-conventional energy sources, and libraries were never included in the agenda of the sample village assemblies. In Gunaseelam, seven subjects were never discussed in the sample village assemblies. Mat industries, social forestry and farm forestry, minor forest produce, fuel and fodder, non-conventional energy sources and Public Distribution System. In Ayyampalayam Grama Panchayat, three subjects did not attract the attention of the Grama Sabha meetings during the reporting period. They include social forestry and farm forestry, minor forest produce and adult and non-formal education. There are four subjects, which never figured in the agenda of the sample Grama Sabha meetings in Vellur Grama Panchayat during the three years under study. Social forestry and farm forestry, minor forest produce, fuel and fodder and non-conventional energy sources. The most neglected subjects, therefore, are social forestry and farm forestry, minor forest produce, fuel and fodder non-conventional energy sources, adult and non-formal education and Public Distribution system.

**Exploring the Root Causes:**

The findings show a pathetic situation in the matter of responsiveness of Grama Saabhas in Musiri block institutions for people’s participation and platforms created for addressing people’s participation and platforms created for addressing people’s needs. This lack of serious discussion on development issues in a District like Tiruchirappalli requires further probing and investigation. The reasons are closely related to the lack of commitment of the political leadership to the cause of true devolution of powers to the people, lack of proper orientation and awareness among
the people coupled with their increasing indifference to the public affairs, bureaucratic
apathy towards people’s concerns.

Grama Sabha meetings are very often attended by prospective beneficiaries of
the welfare schemes. These beneficiaries are very often women of families living
below poverty line, women with little or no exposure to public interactions due to low
level of education. The middle class and the upper caste groups totally kept away from
the meetings. They felt that it was none of their concern. The duty of the citizens to
participate in the reconstruction of their environment by participating in the
governance of local bodies is widely forgotten. The society has a commitment to itself
to prevent it from disintegration and corruption. The lack of this commitment among
the citizens is a major cause of the malaise.

Decentralisation is in principle, but good governance is yet to come. ‘The
Statement of Objects and Reasons’ accompanying the Constitution Amendment Bill⁶
said in 1991 that the PRIs failed to become viable and responsive people’s bodies due
to absence of regular elections, prolonged super-sessions, insufficient representation
of weaker sections like Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes and women, inadequate
devolution of powers and lack of financial resources. The 73rd Constitutional
amendment Act 1992 and the subsequent confirmation Act, the Tamil Nadu Panchayat
Raj Act 1994, came into being specifically to address these problems affection the
envisioned responsive nature of the PRIs. The Government of Tamil Nadu in
compliance with the Amendment Act did make provisions in the law to address all the
above problems by regular elections in five years and holding elections

With in a period of six months in the event of super-session of any Panchayat, reservation of seats to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population for membership of Panchayats and office of Chairpersons in Panchayats at each level, reservation of not less than one-third of the seats for women, devolution by the State Legislature of powers and responsibilities upon the Panchayats with respect to the preparation of plans for economic development and social justice and for the implementation of development schemes and sufficient funds authorized by the State Legislature. In addition to a major share of funds from the State, the Panchayats were granted powers to collect funds from the public by cash or kind and through taxes, duties, tolls and fees.

The present reality stares at us in spite of these efforts towards decentralisation. This study becomes an empirical affirmation of the official government position. After several years since the enactment of relevant laws, in 2002, one study assessed the status of PRIs, especially the Grama Sabhas as handicapped in many fronts. "The Grama Sabhas and Ward Sabhas were severely handicapped by poor attendance, non-participation of above poverty line families, lack of discussion on development issues, emphasis on beneficiary selection, lack of effective social audit and want of enthusiasm among elected members".