Chapter VII

The Gram Sabha

The first and the basic institution upon which rests the entire superstructure of our democracy is the Gram Sabha. It is a large body of the whole citizenry of the village. The Gram Panchayat acts as an executive of this 'House of the Villagers'. It was the cherished hope of the fathers of the Panchayati Raj that the whole mass of the village population - being a compact little community - meeting twice or thrice a year and deliberating over the problems of their locality, would not only help inculcating greater understanding of democracy by converting it into a participating one (as distinguished from its representative brand), but would also make Independence more meaningful to the ignorant and illiterate inhabitants of the innumerable rural localities of the country.

Keeping in view this noble objective, the Punjab Gram Panchayat Act, 1952, statutorily recognised the institution of the Gram Sabha and also provided that its meetings be convened twice a year. The Sarpanch would preside, all the Panches would attend. In the


2. Punjab Gram Panchayat Act, 1952, Section 5, Sub-section (1).

3. Ibid., Section 12 (1).
summer ('Harir') meeting, the Sabha would debate and consider the annual budget and the development plan of the village as prepared and presented to it by the Gram Panchayat, and in the autumn ('Sawani') meeting, the Sabha would review the progress of the various schemes undertaken in the village. It was intended that the Gram Sabha should develop a system of 'internal checks and balances on the mis-use of authority by the Sarpanch............. as well on the work of the officials of various levels'. It was, thus, agreed, as the Study Team on the position of the Gram Sabha remarks, "that in the final pattern of relationship, the Gram Panchayat should be responsible to the Gram Sabha". The Rajasthan Government's Study Team on Panchayati Raj also projects the same ultimate objective of the Gram Sabha. "The structure of Panchayati Raj..... would reveal that we envision Gram Sabha to function as the popular base for the Panchayati Raj set-up. The Panchayat at the village level should draw its authority from and be responsible to the Gram Sabha.....".

The need for extending statutory recognition to the Gram Sabha has been repeatedly made by a number of Conferences, Seminars, Study Teams, discussion groups, etc.

2. Ibid, para 2.18.
but one is surprised to find that even to-day (1966), four States, namely, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Mysore, and Rajasthan, do not statutorily recognise the existence of the Gram Sabha. Most surprising of all is the attitude of the Government of Rajasthan. The Study Team on Panchayati Raj appointed by it discussed this question at length and made a strong recommendation that the Gram Sabha be given recognition by law.

One fails to understand why these States have paid little heed to the recommendations of so many bodies. Is it because they lack faith in the people even to the extent of inviting them to simply deliberate over the problems of the village? Or is it because they anticipate that the Gram Sabha would hamper the smooth functioning of the Gram Panchayat? Or is it because they want to suspend the Panchayati Raj set up in mid-air and not to allow it to touch the ground below and grow roots?

Coming to the study of the actual position of the working of the Gram Sabha in the sixteen villages, covered in this study, one finds that the record of their performance has not been very impressive. Two yardsticks

can be applied to measure it. First, the number of meetings held, and, second, the number of people who attended them. So far as the former is concerned, this study reveals that 85 percent, 61 percent and 85 percent Gram Panchayats, convened the meetings of their Gram Sabha during the years, respectively, 1963-64, 1964-65, and 1965-66. (Table No. 21). This performance of theirs is not much discouraging, for occasional lapses, here and there, are but natural, particularly in the initial stages.

Table No. 21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total No. required</th>
<th>Total No. actually held</th>
<th>No. of Hari meetings</th>
<th>No. of Sarpani meetings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963-64</td>
<td>25 (100)</td>
<td>22 (85)</td>
<td>19 (59)</td>
<td>9 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-65</td>
<td>26 (100)</td>
<td>16 (61)</td>
<td>12 (75)</td>
<td>4 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965-66</td>
<td>26 (100)</td>
<td>22 (85)</td>
<td>12 (55)</td>
<td>10 (45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1. The figures of only 13 Gram Panchayats were available.

2. For the details see Appendix No. III

Source: Minutes Books (Gram Sabha) of the Gram Panchayats, under study.

These figures, do, however, point out that the number of meetings during the years, 1964-65 have been
comparatively less than in the years 1963-64 and 1964-65. Only one reason appears to be responsible for this is that the Government of India realising that "though a number of States have recognised the Gram Sabha, statutorily and assigned them certain specific functions, it is yet to develop into an institution capable of exerting effective influence on the village panchayats", appointed the Study Team on the position of the Gram Sabha in Panchayati Raj Movement. The Team submitted its report in 1963. Its findings stimulated the interest of the authorities in the utility of the institution of the Gram Sabha. Consequently, greater emphasis began to be put on the need to revitalise it. The Block Officers took particular interest in the convening of its meetings. It is interesting to know that all the Gram Panchayats with no exception, convened their Summer ("Hari") meetings and all of them were attended by the respective Block Officers. It appears that, gradually, the enthusiasm at all levels began to wane and by the end of the year, the whole of it vanished. This explains the reason why there came such a steep fall in the number of meetings, i.e. from 22 to 16. In 1964-65, the meetings were held in those Gram Panchayats only where either the Sarpanches were a little more pushing or where some common

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problems of the villagers of some unusual nature confronted them. Nowhere the officials went to participate in them. If in the year 1965-66, the number of meetings shows an upward trend, the latter of the two reasons largely accounts for it.

From the attendance point of view, the performance of the Gram Sabhas has not been very much encouraging, for in 52 percent of the meetings the attendance has been between 10 and 25 percent members. In only 15 and 5 percent, meetings it has respectively, been in the range of 25 to 50 percent and above 50 percent (Table No. 22). But there has, however, been noticed that the attendance in the meetings has gradually been showing an upward trend. The percentage of the meetings, having the attendance below 10 percent of the members has fallen from 36 to 22, whereas the percentage of the meetings, having the attendance in the range of 25 to 50 percent has gone up from 14 to 22, and, similarly, that in the range of above 50 percent from 5 to 12. Though the progress is very meagre, yet it is there, which is definitely a very healthy sign.

Furthermore, while measuring the success of an institution as the Gram Sabha, one cannot isolate an important factor of the socio-economic environments in which it is to grow. There is no exaggeration in the fact that, until recently, our villagers were steeped in ignorance and illiteracy. They feared an ordinary constable and looked to the petty revenue officials for
Table 10. 23

Showing the Attendance of Members in the Gram Sabha Meetings in the years 1963-64, 1964-65 and 1965-66.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>1963-64</th>
<th>1964-65</th>
<th>1965-66</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-10%</td>
<td>10-20%</td>
<td>20-30%</td>
<td>Above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road-side</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(67)</td>
<td>(33)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(57)</td>
<td>(43)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(75)</td>
<td>(23)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(21)</td>
<td>(57)</td>
<td>(22)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(40)</td>
<td>(60)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(75)</td>
<td>(25)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>west</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(63)</td>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>(80)</td>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(57)</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(33)</td>
<td>(58)</td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(35)</td>
<td>(46)</td>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(25)</td>
<td>(38)</td>
<td>(17)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(22)</td>
<td>(46)</td>
<td>(22)</td>
<td>(12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Figures in brackets show the percentage.

Source: The Minute Books (Gram Sabha) of the Gram Panchayats under study for the relevant years.
favours. Judged in the context of such a horrible state of affairs, the periodical gathering of one hundred or so village adults, wherein may take place lively discussion on the important problems of the village, and also the occasional interpolation of the Sarpanch, this writer thinks, is no small success of the Gram Sabha.

This view was also supported by 10 percent non-officials respondents (Table No. 25). They referred to another fact that the villagers did not judge the success of the Gram Sabha by the number of people that attended its meetings, but by the number of families that were represented there. They did not expect the whole family en bloc to come and attend the meeting. They could not simply afford to do that because they were too worried about the earning of their livelihood which was very hard in their areas. They, therefore, felt satisfied if one family sent one representative who would not only represent the viewpoint of the other inmates of the house, but would also, in return, convey to them the gist of the proceedings of the meeting, thereby, indirectly, associating all of them with the larger issues of the village life. If this viewpoint is accepted, one finds that the attendance of the meeting, thus, indirectly, goes up at least, four-folds. In the initial stages, this much degree of involvement of the villagers is not very much discouraging. In the context of such considerations, the trend of the increasing attendance, appears all the more healthy. It does give an indication that the idea
of the Gram Sabha is being gradually grasped by the villagers.

Table No. 22

Showing the Progress in the working of the Gram Sabha during 1963-64, 1964-65 and 1965-66, in the three sets of villages (in respect to the number of meetings).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Set of villages</th>
<th>Total No. to be held</th>
<th>1963-64</th>
<th>1964-65</th>
<th>1965-66</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Road-side</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(107)</td>
<td>(67)</td>
<td>(42)</td>
<td>(24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td>(76)</td>
<td>(35)</td>
<td>(30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior-most.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(107)</td>
<td>(83)</td>
<td>(34)</td>
<td>(26)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Minute Books (Gram Sabha) of the Gram Panchayats under study for the relevant years.

From the educational point of view, the analysis reveals that the performance of the Gram Sabha has been the poorest in the road-side villages, and that, as one moves away from the roads and other communication lines, the performance gets better. It is the best in the interior-most villages. Both the number of meetings and the attendance of the members therein certify this fact. It is revealed that the road-side villages held (during the last three years, i.e. 1963-64, 1964-65 and 1965-66) 67 percent of the required number of meetings and those of interior and interior-most villages 78 and 63 percent, respectively (Table No. 23).
Further on, it is found that in the road-side villages the number of meetings wherein the attendance was below 10 percent is the largest (i.e. 67 percent) and that in the range of 25 - 50 percent is the smallest (i.e. 33 percent) (Table No. 22). On the other hand, the trend is altogether reverse in the interior-most villages. Not only that, but there have been found instances in the interior-most villages where the meetings of the Gram Sabha were very largely attended. In one case, as many as 73 percent of the members turned up. It is noticed still further that the interest of the people of the road-side villages in the Gram Sabha is gradually waning as is clear from the fact that their attendance in the range of below 10 percent has increased from 57 percent (in 1963-64) to 69 percent (in 1965-66), whereas in the range of 10 and 25 percent, it has fallen from 43 percent (1963-64) to 29 percent (1965-66) (Table No. 22). On the other hand, the interest of the people in the interior-most villages has been considerably stimulated, for the figures show that their attendance in the range of below 10 percent has fallen from 20 percent to nil, and in the range of 10 to 25 percent has increased from 50 to 77 percent.

This trend of the decreasing interest of the road-side villagers in the Gram Sabha is quite surprising in view of the fact that they are more educated and enlightened. They should have grasped the idea of the Gram Sabha more readily than those of their brethren who live in the remote areas and are comparatively less educa-
The non-official and official respondents when asked to account for this situation, put forward three reasons (Table No. 24). In the first place, it was explained that there was less of community spirit among the people of the road-side villages than in those of the interior-most villages. This opinion was held by 63 percent of the non-official respondents and 60 percent of the officials. Elaborating their viewpoint, they said, residents of the interior-most villages were more well-knit with one another by various ties of social and economic relationship. They, therefore, had a greater sense of responsibility towards the village community. Hence their response to any call for community gathering was more favourable. The people of the road-side villages, on the other hand, had developed an urban outlook. Torn by a variety of interest groups, they had become more individualistic in thought and behaviour. They did not want to indulge themselves in any type of collective thinking.

The second view was that the people of the road-side villages, being more enlightened about the working of the various political institutions, had comparatively less faith in the utility of the Gram Sabha. 27 percent of the non-officials and 30 percent of the official (and the majority of the elite hailing from these villages) said that in the initial stages they had an impression that the Gram Sabha might prove to be an useful forum for getting them rid of certain problems. But as they experienced
with that, they found that it was too ineffective an institution to alleviate their difficulties. Their interest in it gradually waned. On the other hand, to the villagers of the interior-most areas the institution of the Gram Sabha was just a new thing. They were yet to have the lesson of its ineffectiveness.

The third reason cited was that the road-side villagers were so busy in their individual pursuits, that they did not have enough time to attend to such gatherings. They wish to be left to themselves quite undisturbed.

Table No. 24

It is observed that the attitude of the road-side villagers towards the Gram Sabha is comparatively colder than those of the interior-most village people. What do you think are the possible reasons for this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of the reply</th>
<th>Non-officials</th>
<th>Officials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lack of Community spirit</td>
<td>30 = 63</td>
<td>6 = 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Lack of faith in the effectiveness of the Gram Sabha.</td>
<td>13 = 27</td>
<td>3 = 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Too busy in their pursuits</td>
<td>5 = 10</td>
<td>1 = 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summing up the position of the working of the Gram Sabha in all the sixteen villages covered in this survey, one finds that the record of the performance, on the whole, has not been very much commendable. It appears to be so, particularly when one takes into consideration that the institution has been in existence in the Punjab since 1953.
(when the Punjab Gram Panchayat Act, 1952 came into force). Thirteen years is a very long period. Had very sincere efforts been made, this institution could have by now firmly struck roots in the soil.

The reports of the poor development of the Gram Sabha have been made by almost all those who studied the situation.

The Fifth Evaluation Report (1958) of the Programme Evaluation Organisation, Government of India, observes, "The principle of consultation between the Panchayat and the village body is a commendable one.... However, experience has not been very satisfactory so far. The village body meetings do not evoke any enthusiasm and are generally not effective. Most meetings are very thinly attended. In the Panchayats studied in the block of Gorakhpur district of U.P., it was observed that there was quorum in the village meetings and the Panchayat budgets could be passed only with the help of the clause which provides for the holding of a second meeting without the requirement of a quorum, if the first meeting could not be held for want of it".

The findings of the Study Team on the position of the Gram Sabha in Panchayati Raj Movement, are, "of the two meetings to be held in each year, most of the meetings

in most of the States, had to be postponed, the Team gathered, for lack of quorum, and even the adjourned meetings, which require no quorum, had also not been on the whole, popular, judged from the point of view of average attendance. During the visits of the Team we had occasion to observe some Gram Sabha meetings. We found that attendance in them was impressive but our inquiry showed that Gram Sabha meetings were generally very poorly attended and the figures of attendance given were also, in many cases, inflated. The interest evinced hitherto by the members of the village Communities in the institution of Gram Sabha has, thus, been of a very limited character.  

The report of the Rajasthan Government's Study Team On Panchayati Raj is, "The meetings of the Gram Sabha are being convened by the Panchayats. There is, however, unanimity of opinion amongst all the persons we have met or communicated with that the Gram Sabhas not yet become an effective institution. It has been found that the meetings of the Gram Sabha are not being regularly held and with a few exceptions, the meetings held are not being well attended. The Gram Sabha has not yet created the requisite interest and enthusiasm amongst the people.  

The opinion of Mr. C.K. Dey, Minister for
Community Development and Co-operation, Government of
India, in this behalf is, "We know that inspite of
statutory provisions, members of Gram Sabha are not
taking interest in the deliberations of this body. This
is the experience all over the country".

With a view to finding out the causes of the
slow development of the Gram Sabha, the opinion of the
respondents was elicited. As many as 21 percent of the non-
officials, as hinted earlier, did not admit of the
relevance of the question. They asserted that the
Gram Sabha had already gone into strides.

The rest of them, however, were of the
opinion that the Gram Sabha to all intents and purposes
was a non-existent entity. They enumerated a number of
causes which were responsible for its poor development.
As many as ten non-officials and three officials said
that enough efforts had not been made to bring home
to the people the under-lying philosophy of the
Panchayati Raj. The common man was still ignorant of the
duties that he owed towards the success of the various
institutions of the new organisational set-up. The
consequence was that the bulk of the people in the
villages still did not know that they, as a whole,

1. Report on the Seminar On Fundamental Problems of
formed a composite body, called the Gram Sabha, which
meeting after every six months was to take stock of the
situation regarding the progress of the village in various
walks of life and also through the agency of its
committees to lend a helping hand to the Gram Panchayat
in executing the various programmes, and to criticise
the Sarpanch and the Panches for their failure and
misdeeds. They continued to remain under the impression
that their function even in the new decentralised demo-
cracy was confined to their participation in the
quinquennial elections and that in the intervening
periods their elected representatives were to be left
alone to look after the village problems and programmes.

No body, they said, seemed to have made
vigorous efforts to bring home to the people the
difference between the older representative brands of
local democracy and the new decentralised pattern of the
participating democracy. The obvious result is that the
Gram Sabha has still not struck roots in the soil.

The Study Team on the position of the Gram Sabha
in the Panchayati Raj Movement also mentions thus, "The
villagers generally are not even aware of the separate
existence of the Gram Sabha as an institution as distin-
guished from the Panchayat. Even where the villagers
could recognise that these are two different bodies,
seldom have they been aware of their fights and responsi-
Table No. 25

Q: It has been observed that the Gram Sabha could not become a regular working body. What reasons do you ascribe to this situation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of the reply</th>
<th>Number of non-officials</th>
<th>Number of officials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. No, it has been working well and satisfactorily.</td>
<td>10 (21)</td>
<td>nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Yes.</td>
<td>38 (79)</td>
<td>10 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reasons are:

a) Apathy of the Sarpanch and Panches
   8
   4

b) Rampant poverty.
   10
   5

c) Lack of awareness of the existence of the Gram Sabha.
   10
   9

d) Lethargy of the people.
   12
   -

e) Panchayati Raj failed to come to the expectations of the people.
   11
   -

f) Long distances.
   4
   -

g) Village factionalism.
   8
   2

h) Medium of publicity not available.
   1
   -

Note: The percentages of the detailed replies could not be worked out because a large number of respondents assigned more than one reason.
abilities as members of the Gram Sabha".

The Study Team On Democratic Decentralization in Rajasthan, sponsored by the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development, also makes a similar observation: "It is obligatory for a Panchayat to convene twice a year a meeting of all the adult residents of a Panchayat circle. At such a meeting the programme and work undertaken by the Panchayat are to be explained, the views of the residents ascertained, and considered at the next meeting of the Panchayat. The idea underlying this provision is obvious but we did not notice any marked tendency to utilise this provision. We got the impression that many village councils were not aware of this and it does not appear that this provision is being used meaningfully."

Another twelve non-officials hold the people themselves responsible for the inadequate working of the Gram Sabha. They said that the centuries of foreign domination had destroyed in them the very spirit of initiative and self-help; with the result, they had come to be stricken with colossal lethargy and stagnation. Wherever they were called upon to come or participate in any affair of the village they simply tried to avoid that.

If to-day Gram Sabha could not become a lively institution, the only reason, they said, was their attitude of apathy and indifference. People did not like to budge out of their houses or to leave their business for a while and to sit and deliberate over their common problems, simply because they had not hitherto been trained to do so. It needs hard and sustained efforts to shake off their lethargy and inculcate in them an urge and consciousness for the vital need of collective thinking on common affairs.

This opinion too is not devoid of truth, for a number of people who were interviewed were asked the question: "Did you ever attend a meeting of the Gram Sabha? If not, why? was no such meeting ever held? If held, then why didn't you go there"?. Most of the people did not know if a meeting was ever held. Of the rest, who had the knowledge of the meetings, many did not attend. To the question why, they could not give any satisfactory or cogent reason. The common reply was: "No special reason accounted for it". This plainly proves that nothing but lethargy was responsible for it.

The Study Team on the Position of the Gram Sabha in Panchayati Raj Movement has also mentioned this factor as one of the causes for the poor growth of the Gram Sabha. It points out, "The villagers are aware of the doubtful value of the Gram Sabha and they find it more useful to be engaged in their own productive venture, or to even enjoy leisure at home, rather than attend the Gram Sabha meeting, which is of no direct interest to them."
This apathy, which is also visible in municipal areas, etc., is all the more evident at the Gram Sabha level. The rampant poverty in the 'valley' was assigned to be another reason. Ten non-officials and five officials pointed out to this. They said that the country on the whole was poor, but the State of affairs in this region was still worse. The bulk of the people were engaged in petty professions which hardly provided them with two bare meals a day. That obviously handicapped the people. They had to keep so busy from morning till evening in earning their bread that they could hardly divert their attention to other things. Whenever they were called upon to attend a meeting of the Gram Sabha they were compelled to make a choice between the day's previous labour and the meeting. Since the former would fetch them bread and the latter nothing substantial, they tended to ignore the latter, even if they wished to go there. The grinding poverty, it was mentioned was a major hurdle in the growth of the Gram Sabha.

Elaborating their viewpoint, this section of the respondents further said that poverty was responsible for the poor performance of the Gram Sabha in another way also. A few sections of the rural community who had traditionally been poor and

down-trodden had become, with the lapse of centuries, so much orthodox and timid that repeated doses of social and economic reforms had failed to shake off their fear complex. They still hesitated to come to those gatherings where their old masters (the ex-landlords) were to come. If at all they were induced to come, they would sit at a distance or in a corner and would not open their lips at all because of the old inhibitions. They knew that though all formal barriers separating the have-abouts from the have-nots' had been removed, yet they (the ex-landlords) were so deeply rooted in power and wealth that they could still harass them in a number of ways. Hence the poorer sections sometimes deliberately avoided coming to the meetings.

There appears to be some substance in the truth of this viewpoint, because the economic disparity amongst the various sections of the village people was cited as one of the reasons why the Gram Sabhas could not make much impact on the people of the road-side villages. On the other hand, if the meetings of the Gram Sabhas have been more successful in the villages of the interior-most areas, the reason is that there mostly reside people of the same economic level.

Eight non-officials and four officials blamed the Panches and Sarpanches for not convening the meetings of the Gram Sabhas. They pointed out that some of them were corrupt and they abused their power and position either to swell the benefits of the development programmes themselves or to oblige their friends and relatives, or
to alienate their opponents so much that they now feared to face the general public gathering. But since not to convene any meeting at all was not possible in view of the insistence of the Government officials to do so, they fixed the meetings of the Sabha at a short notice and made the announcement for these only in those localities where their supporters lived. These tactics of theirs worked easily in the district of Langra, where due to the scattered nature of the population, a Gram Sabha was usually, composed of the adults from a number of villages. The Sarpanch would not ordinarily send the Chowkidar to make announcement in those villages which were opposed to him. In this way, he could manoeuvre to disperse the meeting for want of the quorum and, thus saved his face. These tactics, they said were a common device.

The apathetic attitude of the Panches and Sarpanches towards the Gram Sabha has also been taken note of by both Study Teams, namely, that of the Position of the Gram Sabha in the Panchayat Movement, and that of the Rajasthan Government's on Panchayati Raj. The former observes: "The power structure of the Panchayata is not often keen that the Gram Sabha should meet and more so in view of the fact that the opposition leaders in the Gram Sabha may raise embarrassing questions. The ruling elite of the village, therefore, sometimes even go to the length of ensuring that Gram Sabha meetings are not properly advertised".

1. Ibid, para 1.19 (vi).
The opinion of the Rajasthan Government's Study Team on Panchayati Raj is, "A good number of Sarpanches are apathetic towards Gram Sabha and do not take pains to convene the meetings. They are, in some cases, afraid of facing the general assembly of people for fear of criticism".

Eleven non-official respondents put forward another reason, namely, that the institutions of Panchayati Raj had largely failed to come up to the expectations of the people. They said that since good old days when Mahatama Gandhi preached the cult of non-violence and made an appeal to the people to boycott the British courts and instead set up their own village Panchayats for the settlement of their disputes, people had been listening to the high praises of the Panchayati Raj. They had been told day in and day out that the village panchayats would act as a panacea for all their ills, thus raising their hopes very high. Their fond expectations were given a further push when Panchayati Raj was introduced with a lot of fanfare. The cumulative effect of all this was that their belief that the Gram Panchayats would get them rid of all they had suffered from and secure to them all that they cherished for, came to be strengthened. But since the institution of Panchayati Raj could not function properly due to such factors, as mass illiteracy.

and ignorance, village factionalism, vested interests, poor financial resources etc., the interest of the people in them began to wane and increasing disappointment followed. In the context of such a feeling of disappointment, to expect of the people that they should come to the meetings of the Gram Sabha in large numbers and to vigorously participate in its deliberations, the respondents pointed out, was unrealistic.

This writer himself came across a number of people especially of the road-side villages, who when asked why they did not attend the meetings of the Gram Sabha, replied that they did not find such meetings of much use in the sense that whatever programme they chalked out in one meeting, would not be carried out by the Gram Panchayat, either because of the indifference or the negative attitude of the Panches and Sarpanches or because of the lack of finances and such other hindering factors. Thus, the poor performance of the Gram Panchayat is undoubtedly one of the reasons which has marred the enthusiasm of the people.

Your non-official respondents said that the long distance that people of one village were to travel to attend the meetings of the Sabha, was a big discouraging factor. Sometimes, the distance stretched into miles (as, for instance in the case of the Kothiwar) because the Sabha areas were spread over a huge territory. The hazards of the hill-journey, particularly in the absence of the efficient means of transport, constituted too big a hurdle especially for those who were already quite
disinterested and ir-different to these meetings.

Eight non-official respondents and two official respondents said that the composite nature of the Sabha areas promoted inter-village rivalry which arose due to a number of reasons, the most important of which was the allocation of developmental funds and programmes. The finances of the Gram Panchayats were so thin that it was next to impossible to provide all the amenities to each and every sector of the Sabha area at one and the same time. It was, therefore, obvious that when the villages were selected for purposes of development, the residents of these localities would feel annoyed which did not get any substantial allocation. Their annoyance assumed proportions and got transformed into jealousies if their interest were continuously ignored. The obvious outcome of this jealousy was the dampening of the enthusiasm of the people for the institutions of Panchayati Raj and that would ultimately affect the attendance of the Gram Sabha meetings.

It was learnt that in one Gram Panchayat, namely Uparli Kothi (in Baghota block), there is a small village (called Bhatti), whose residents had decided en-bloc to keep away from all the activities of the Gram Panchayat so long as their village was not separated from the parent village and constituted into a separate Gram Panchayat, for which they had applied to the higher authorities. Their main grievances was the step-motherly treatment of the Gram Panchayat towards
them. Consequently, they had boycotted the meetings of the Gram Sabha.

This section of the respondents who held the village factionalism responsible for the poor growth of the Gram Sabha, further explained that the other important factor, which created strife both among the component villages (which formed parts of a composite Sabha area) and the individuals, was the office of the Sarpanch. Finding the Chairmanship of the Gram Panchayat an attractive office, partly because it carried a higher status and greater prestige, and partly because it gave an added advantage to this incumbents to meet their own and their supporters' developmental needs—every component village wanted to capture it and every ambitious individual liked to have it. Those who lost the elections turned jealous and embittered towards the one who was elected. They now adopted a policy of obstructing the work of the Panchayat. Whenever it initiated any proposal, they would oppose that tooth and nail without going into the merits of the case. The Gram Sabha became the target of their wrath. They and their supporters did not come to the meetings en-bloc. Thus, factionalism whether springing from inter-village rivalry or from the ambition of a few individuals, struck adversely at the roots of the Gram Sabha.

Lastly, according to one respondent the Gram Panchayat faced the practical difficulty of giving publicity of the date and time of the Gram Sabha meeting. The Government had provided each village with a Chowkidar, who
was expected to perform such duties of the Gram Panchayat. But as stated earlier, he had to serve many masters, like the village headmen, the 'Patwari' (the village accountant) and the police, who being the traditional functionaries, pressed him more, leaving little time for him to devote to the Panchayat work. The respondent said that their problem became all the more difficult in those villages which were far-flung in area.

Viewing the problem in a more realistic way, this argument does not seem to be a cogent one. Village is a small compact community where the contact of the people with one another is so close and intimate that even an un-important affair goes round the locality so fast that it becomes the talk of the village in no time. It is, therefore, not at all difficult to communicate to every resident the programme of the Gram Sabha meeting. The Panches who hail from the various parts of the Panchayat area can perform the job themselves. Hence to say that there is the problem of communication is without much substance.

To sum up, the causes of the poor development of the Gram Sabha are: the lack of the awareness of the people of the separate existence of the Gram Sabha, the apathy of the people, poor economic conditions of the inhabitants of the district, the indifferent attitude on the part some Brampanches and Panches, the failure of

1. See page 217.
the institutions of Panchayati Raj to alleviate the difficulties of the people and the resultant dis-appoint-
ment and the village factionalism, especially the inter-
village rivalry in the case of the composite Gram
Panchayats. The findings of the Study Team On the
Position of Gram Sabha in Panchayati Raj Movement, and
that of the Rajasthan Government on Panchayati Raj
(the only available Studies which examined the position
of the Gram Sabha at greater length) - are also a mere or
less the same.

As to the ways for the strengthening of the Gram
Sabha, an inquiry was made from the respondents. Fifteen
non-official respondents and a fair majority of the
village elite did not have any thing to say in this behalf.
(Table No. 26). Some of them did feel that the Gram Sabha

1. Following causes have been assigned by the Study Team
On the Position of Gram Sabha in Panchayati Raj Movement:

i) Lack of awareness;
ii) Personal nature of village politics,
iii) Lack of common venue;
iv) Lack of time,
v) Lack of communications;
vi) Unwillingness of the Pradhan/members of the Panchayat
vii) Apathy of the villagers.

On Panchayati Raj, Government of Rajasthan, enumerates the
following causes-

i) Lack of proper publicity
ii) Unsuitable timings,
iii) Apathy of Sarpanch,
iv) Inadequacy of functions and scope,
v) Illiteracy of people;
vi) Lack of Secretarial assistance,
had not developed as yet, but they could not put forward any concrete suggestion which could prove helpful to remedy the situation. The rest of the respondents had, however, more than one suggestion to offer.

**Table No. 26**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of the reply</th>
<th>Non-officials</th>
<th>Officials</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Powers of the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayats be enhanced.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Lot of publicity be given about the date and time of the Sabha meeting.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. People be educated about their rights and duties towards the Sabha.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality of leadership be improved.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. No suggestions to make</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Twenty-four non-officials, six officials and (a few of the village elite) felt that unless hard and sustained efforts were not made to educate the masses about the existence and utility of the Gram Sabha, and their rights and duties in relation to this institution, it could never make progress. Once such consciousness dawned upon them, they would flock to its meetings.

Fifteen non-officials, four officials (and quite a large number of the village elite) were in favour of the strengthening of the powers of the Gram Sabha and the
Gram Panchayat. If these could not so far catch the
imagination of the people, the fault, they pointed out,
lay with the fact that their powers had a very limited
scope. That must be improved upon.

Nine respondents wanted improvement in the
media of publicity of the meetings. Another five
suggested that good people should be elected to the Gram
Panchayat who might be able to inspire the masses. In this
way, several suggestions were made.

The opinion of the two Study Teams, namely,
that of the Government of India's on the Position of the
Gram Sabha in Panchayati Raj Movement, and that of the
Government of Rajasthan on Panchayati Raj, also gave
practically the same suggestions, as put forward by
the respondents. The Study Teams' suggestions may
be summed up as: first, that both the Gram Sabha and
Gram Panchayat be strengthened; all the officers of the
block and revenue department should come in person; the
size of the Gram Sabha be made viable; wide publicity
be given to the powers and functions of the Gram Sabha etc.

Here in this context the suggestion made by a
seasoned Indian administrator deserves mention. He says
that the attendance of all the village adults in the meeting
of the Gram Sabha be made compulsory. Defending his

1. Refer to the Report of the Study Team on the Position
2.6, 2.19, 3.1, and 3.4. Also to the Report of the
Study Team on Panchayati Raj, Government of Rajasthan, Op
Cit., para 6.15.
suggestion, he argues, when a nation is determined to fight, indifference and apathy, emerging from illiteracy and ignorance, it has to resort to the element of compulsion. Does not a democratic country make education and the observance of certain rules of health compulsory for all? Then why can't this be, he adds.

This writer feels that the only way to make the Gram Sabha meetings regular and lively is to strengthen the Gram Panchayat. Unless the Gram Panchayat becomes a focus of the whole village activity and unless all the local functionaries who hold parallel positions and, as such, are in a position to challenge the authority of the Gram Panchayat and to even flout its directives are not made responsible to it, the Gram Sabha can never hope to be vigorous. The basic need is to rehabilitate the confidence of the people on the Panchayat. They are to be convinced by concrete steps and not by empty words that the Gram Panchayat is the central institution of the village and, more important than this, is that it can help them solve all their manifold administrative and developmental needs.

What one witnesses to-day is that on one side there is the 'patwari' who considers the village his inherited independent domain. He has absolutely no relationship

much less any responsibility, to the Gram Panchayat. Being the Custodian of all the land records of the village and, thus, ideally placed to do any mischief to anyone, he still ranks high in the eyes of the illiterate and ignorant villagers. As compared to him, the Gram Panchayat is an inferior body. Then there is the traditional institution of the village head-man (‘Lambardar’) whose incumbent still hails from the erstwhile landed gentry of the village. Though much of the lustre of his office has faded in the course of time, yet he goes quite strong. Above all, is the institution of the police. Although it is supposed to work in accordance with the wishes of the Gram Panchayat, yet it generally aligns with the ‘Patwari’, ‘Lambardar’ and other richer sections, thereby becoming a source of fear and oppression to the people.

Whenever anyone of them harms any villager, he would naturally come to the Gram Panchayat and lodge a complaint with it. But when after some time he finds that the Gram Panchayat is too weak a body to take action against the trouble-makers of the village or to set his grievances right, he feels utterly frustrated and all his confidence in the utility of this institution shatters. In the context of that impression, the call of the Gram Sabha becomes somewhat teasing to him.

The state of affairs on the development side is equally horrible. People were under the impression that the establishment of the Gram Panchayat and other institutions would facilitate the development of the
villagers. But to their utter disappointment, they found that such had not been the case due to a number of factors. Whatever they suggested could not be done, mainly because of the lack of resources. Whenever they at the call of the Gram Panchayat and higher authorities contributed money, material and labour for the construction of such projects, as the building of the hospital or the School, the levelling of the ground for the children park, or the construction of a road and the like, and when the Government failed to discharge its share of responsibility in the form of opening the hospital or School in that building or the fixing up the cres-bar etc. in the park, or the plying of vehicles on the road, the sharpness of the edge of their enthusiasm became at once blunted.

To sum up, one finds that the Gram Panchayat is suffering from its inherent weakness. The entire responsibility of it lies on the half-hearted nature of the Governmental policies. It is, therefore, essential that the institution of the Gram Panchayat be strengthened. All the village functionaries should be made fully responsible to it and all the inadequacies in its powers and short-comings in its functioning should be eradicated. Once it becomes strong, people would automatically be drawn towards the meetings of the Sabha.

The Study Team on the position of Gram Sabha in the Panchayati Raj Movement also makes a similar plea. "But this task of bringing the Gram Sabha to an effective position in the village community could be best achieved, we feel, by strengthening the institution
of Panchayat, which is the executive of the village assembly and also the administrative organ through which the higher tier local government institutions work. This has to be done by extending the sphere of its activities and also by making more funds available to enable the Panchayat to attend to the felt needs of the village population as brought out by the meetings of voters.

One very important reason why the gram sabha has failed to attract the villagers is that by and large no effort has been made to discuss and find solutions for their felt needs and basic problems. In the present, the villagers will not get interested in matters of village development unless his basic problems are attended to. In areas where this has been tried even to a limited extent, the attendance at these meetings has improved and the villager has shown greater interest. It will, therefore, be necessary to develop the Gram Sabha as forum where people could discuss all their problems relating to the village.

In the end, it may be suggested that the meetings of the Gram Sabha be given the highest priority both by the officials and the non-officials. It should be fixed fairly well in advance and widely notified among the people. It should, further, be made obligatory for all

all officers concerned with the developmental needs of the village to come and attend that in person. When the villagers are told that the meeting would be attended by the Block Development and Panchayat Officer, the Social Education and Panchayat Officer, the Extension Officer for Agriculture, the Compost Inspector, the Tehsildar, the 'Patwari', the 'lambardar', the sub-inspector of police, the forest ranger and the headmaster, they would also come in large numbers. Above all, when an opportunity of free and frank expression of their views and grievances is afforded to everyone, and an assurance is given that all their complaints would be looked into sympathetically and action taken, would be reported back in the next meeting of the Gram Sabha and if actually done so, people would be encouraged to come. People are to be sincerely convinced that the Government wants to strengthen the village institutions and to serve the masses through them. This is the only sure and easiest way to make not only the Gram Sabha but all the local institutions popular and vigorous.