

Functioning of Grassroots Democracy: Participation, Representation and Accountability in the Panchayats of 5th Scheduled Areas

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Abstract: To realize grass-root democracy in rural areas, the government of India introduced the 73rd Amendment Act in 1993, in which the new Panchayati Raj reforms provided certain mandatory provisions for affirmative action to include all the traditionally marginalized sections of the society, especially, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes in the democratic development process in the local governance. Although the democratic structure and principles of the local governance institutions after the 73rd Amendment Act is an examples, however, various studies have shown that the real spirit has not been achieved so far. The link between 'institutions and community/individual' has been missing which creates the gap between 'participation' and 'empowerment'. In this context, the paper attempts to examine the dynamics of representation, participation and functioning of local self-governance in the Scheduled areas.

Keywords: Democracy, Participation, Representation, Accountability, Decentralisation

I. INTRODUCTION

Participation, representation and accountability may be considered as three pillars of decentralised local governance. The recent Decentralised reforms, including the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996 envision participation in local governance not only in terms of casting votes to elect representatives but as an effective instrument to take control of local affairs and local decision-making. It envisions 'Gram Sabha' to evolve as the citadel of democracy to institutionalize tribal self-governance and tribal autonomy. Participation in the context of local government manifests itself at two levels, i.e. first, citizen's participation ranging from casting votes for choosing representatives to active engagement in local decision making through Gram Sabha; second,

participation of elected representatives in the functioning of the local government institution. The second aspect of participation entails representation in local government. Fulfilling the mandate of representation requires the elected representatives to participate actively in the day-to-day functioning of the Panchayats. Further, the system of democratic local government demands that the representatives should participate in the functioning of the Panchayat in a manner that is responsive to the needs of their constituents, and should remain accountable to them. Responsiveness and accountability, therefore, become essential ingredients of the notion of representation.

II. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PARTICIPATION, REPRESENTATION & ACCOUNTABILITY

A. Participation

Participation has been as dynamic a term as that of democracy itself. Over the years, participation in a democratic context has gained new connotations and has manifested in varying forms. In this context, Cornwall and Gaventa (2000) mention "the idea of participation has been changing over the period of time from the 1970s onwards with new meanings, which distinguished this newly established concept of 'community participation' from that of 'political participation', which includes voting, political parties and lobbying".

In the context of grassroots democracy, the central ideas of participation have been to bring people to the center stage and provide them with an institutional structure, power and opportunity to actively engage themselves in making decisions that affect their lives. To agree with Patnaik (2005), "political participation in a democracy has a wider implication, which ranges from popular participation in electing representatives

to the actual participation of representatives in the process of governance". Notwithstanding democracy primary emphasis on participation, however, it has limited the scope of participation to just casting votes, undermining people's capabilities to constructively engage in deciding public policy. Democratic forms of governments have left it "up to the experts, the professionals, politicians, and managers to ensure that citizens' needs are well served" (Richardson, 1983: 2). In other words, democratic governance made a clear-cut distinction between the role of citizens and representatives so far as participation in decision making is concerned. While the role of citizens was confined to that of electing representatives (participation in choosing candidates), the role of representatives involved articulation of interests of the people in the decisions made by them on behalf of the people (i.e. participation in actual decision-making).

B. Representation

Political presence or empowerment through representation is essential in a liberal democratic setup, principally because of three important reasons. First, most contemporary societies are large, heterogeneous and complex, which does not permit citizens' direct participation in government. Second, the demands, perspectives, and interests are also plural as well as contradictory due to the diverse nature of societies. Third, the highly complex nature of modern legislation and administration, which demands expertise and deal with various issues, disallows direct control over policy. Therefore, interest needs to be presented by an agent, who mediates between the two primary protagonists of the democratic text, i.e. the citizen and the state. For these reasons, the representatives are the key player in the democratic system (Chadhoke, 2009). Thus, the concept of representation has taken shape within the context of power relations among the representative and the represented. In the context of modern liberal democracy, representation can be understood as a relationship between two people, where the representative plays the key role in a democratic setup, holding the authority to perform various actions on behalf of the represented. Helena Catt (1999) distinguishes two types of representation, i.e. delegation and trustee. The role of delegates is to act on behalf of represented. Trustee refers the role of representatives as to make 'good' and 'wise' decisions

for everyone. The central argument of Catt's representative democracy is the idea of people's power, where people choose the representatives, and those representatives are expected to be accountable for the decision that they make for the constituents.

To sum up, the concept of representation seems to be as advocacy on behalf of the underrepresented, in which representation bring into play, a principal-agent relationship. In Pitkin's work of political representation, it is reflected that representation is what the "*representatives 'stood for' and 'acted on behalf of' the represented. Consequently, representation identifies a place for political power to be exercised responsibly and with a degree of accountability*".

C. Accountability

The interpretation of accountability in practical and theoretical contexts has a different connotations, meanings, and implications. Therefore, 'accountability has a range of connotations, but in general, the term can be understood as 'giving an account' or 'being answerable' to someone, who is directly or indirectly involved and affected by those decisions. Often the term 'accountability' expresses the idea of 'responsiveness' of the authorities to their stakeholders to disseminate the information (Cornwall *et. al.*, 2000). It is in this context, Edwards and Hulme (1994:14), rightly pointed out that "*accountability evokes a sense of responsibility, but it also holds the meaning of being held responsible by others being 'held to account.'* In the context of governance, it refers to holding bearers of the public office responsible for their performance and the results of their decisions"

In a democratic set-up, the conventional definition of accountability tends to restrict between two types of functionaries, i.e. the government (political representatives) and public officials (executives), on one side and the beneficiaries and the citizens on the other, where the former is expected to make the plans or actions (Moncrieffe 1998, Patnaik 2005). To enlarge the debate on 'accountability' it would be appropriate to cite Moncrieffe, (2001) concerning the functions of the 'executives' and 'political representatives, who have defined two types of accountabilities, i.e. 'ex-post' and 'ex-ante'. The 'ex-post', accountability generally refers to conducting periodic elections, maintaining law and order

situations and monitoring policy and plans. On the contrary, the 'ex-ante' accountability speaks up about direct deliberations of the political representative in terms of the interest of the citizen and consultation on programmes and policies.

It can be summarized that accountability is a process to restructure the local governance institution and reshape the ways of functioning of local elected representatives. Restructuring the local governance also means the reduction of the degree of centralization, as pointed out by Laderman (2001). Reshaping the functioning of local elected representatives points towards making them politically accountable through reducing the gap between the ruler and the ruled. Therefore, accountability keeps check and balance between the institutions and the power relation between elected representatives and citizens.

III.OBJECTIVES

In the background of the above theoretical discussion, the study intends to analyse the functioning of democratic decentralized local governance with regard to the issues of representation and participation and accountability in the Scheduled Areas. While attempting to understand the dynamics of representation, participation and functioning of local self-governance in the 5th Scheduled areas, the study specifically examines '*whether inclusion and assured representation of tribes in decentralized governance resulted in increased participation and accountability of tribal representatives in working of the Panchayat in the 5th Scheduled Area*'.

IV.METHODOLOGY & SAMPLING

To examine the specified objective, two Gram Panchayats namely Nakiti and Kurli in the Rayagada district of Odisha were identified on the basis of purposive sampling. These two Gram Panchayats are chosen from Rayagada and Bissam Cuttack blocks respectively. The two Panchayats have a decisive presence in the tribal population. The Scheduled Tribe constitutes 90 per cent of the total population in Nakiti Panchayat in the Rayagada Block, whereas in Kurli Panchayat tribal population concentrates 80 per cent. The study relied on qualitative methodology to explore the dynamics of tribal self-governance in the 5th Scheduled Areas of Odisha. The qualitative method

becomes more relevant while one attempts to synthesize the critical problems with regard to community participation in the governance process. While approaching the field with the help of qualitative methods, both primary and secondary sources of data were tapped to elicit relevant data for the study. The study adopted interviews, case study and focused group discussion methods for eliciting relevant data from the respondents.

V.FUNCTIONING OF GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY: FIELD INSIGHTS

Based on the theoretical discussion carried out in the preceding sections an attempt is being made in the following paragraphs to explore the field insights of the functioning of grassroots democracy at 5th Scheduled Areas of Odisha. The functioning of grassroots democracy has been investigated by three attributes of representation which is closely interlinked with each other. These involve (i) the participation of elected representatives in the working of the Panchayats, (ii) responsiveness towards constituents' interests, and (iii) remaining accountable for their decision.

A.Attendance and Agenda of Gram Sabha

The presence of the elected representatives in Gram Sabha/Panchayat meetings speaks about their active engagement in the Panchayat affairs. Interestingly, it was reported that two types of meetings take place in Panchayats, i.e., 'closed-door meeting', and 'public meeting'. The closed-door meeting elaborated as involving only the elected panchayat representatives and officials, whereas, the public meeting referred to as the Gram Sabha meetings, involves all sections of the people including the representatives. Attendance in the 'closed-door' meeting is found to be limited, while full-fledged attendance is reported in the Gram Sabha, which is a public forum and is supposed to be the platform for all the voters of the Panchayat.

Despite the large-scale participation of people in Gram Sabha meetings, the attendance of the women representatives is found to be relatively low. Upon personal interaction, they revealed that their low attendance is not so much because of 'patriarchal domination' or women's restricted entry to the 'public sphere'. Most of the women representatives opined that it is because of their personal work both at the household and outside in the field, which they do along

with their male counterparts to improve the living condition of the family.

Further, it was observed that during the months of harvesting season attendance in Gram Sabha used to be found low among the tribal representatives. On the contrary, during the off- seasons, tribal folk turn into large numbers at the Gram Sabha meetings. It is evident that other than the harvesting seasons, the attendance in Gram Sabha is as per the rules of the quorum.

In many instances, most of the agenda of discussions in the Gram Sabha meetings is related to the following four aspects.

[1] Infrastructure Development

- Construction and repairing of Roads, culverts and drainage system
- Construction of school buildings, Anganwadi and other public assets
- Repair and renovation of existing infrastructure on a preference basis

[2] Civic Amenities

- Operation of drinking water supply, street light, distribution of rations through PDS
- Development of civic infrastructure such as community hall, burial ground, playground

[3] Human Development

- 100% school enrollment of children and reducing drop-out rate
- 100% immunization, distribution of nutritional food etc.

[4] Social Development

- Construction of a ramp for the disabled person at the public premises
- Inclusion of SC, ST, Women and Children in social welfare schemes
- Beneficiaries selection under NOAPS schemes for senior citizens

B. Intricacies of Participation in Decision Making

Gram Sabha as a participatory democratic structure is an instrumental platform to express and discuss the problems of common people. The success of Gram Sabha, therefore, largely, depends upon stakeholder's participation. An attempt had been made to know the

nature and level of the participation of the representative in setting the agenda for the Gram Sabha meetings. It was observed that a significant number of representatives came to the meeting with specific problems of their constituency/wards. The voices of the elected representatives often get diluted because of multiple reasons. One of the important intricacies in an altercation in decision-making is found that the Sarpanch along with the handpicked representatives manipulates the voice of other representatives by suppressing their legitimate voices. The Sarpanch deliberately sidelined the voices of the dissent (representatives), because of their 'ideological affiliation and political battle.'

In the study areas, functions of the panchayat are highly influenced by three factors, viz., 'affiliation, association and clan'. The Panchayat affairs of the study Panchayat have been managed by the above listed three attributes, which in turn decide the representatives' participation in decision-making. The meaningful participation of a representative in decision-making is determined by his/her 'affiliation' to a specific political party. The elected representatives 'association' with a particular set of people such as the Sarpanch, village elite and officials usually rewarded in the decision-making process. Further, the 'clan' inheritance of the elected representatives plays important role in decision-making. In fact, a great deal of panchayat politics revolves around clan domination in tribal areas. Those who have a large clan inheritance play a bigger role in panchayat politics and decision-making. The fact is that the 'clan' works as an informal institution, so the representatives from the dominant clan or supported by the clan get the privilege of participating in the decision-making process.

Supplementing the argument, we have assessed the elected representatives' participation in the running of the local governance institution (Panchayat) on three broad axes, i.e. active participation, passive participation and Co-opted participation using the specific indicators. The study identified three broad possibilities of participation by the elected representative, which are described below (see Table – V.i).

Table V.i: Nature of Participation of Elected Representatives

Nature of Participation	Background of participants	Nature of Participation	Participation on Issues
Active Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elected representatives from an elite background - Elected representatives with party affiliation and clan domination - Experienced in politics and elected more than one term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actively engaged in panchayat issues - Dominates and influences decision-making - Manipulates the voices of others - Mobilise and influence other representatives to agree with them - Closely works and associates with Sarpanch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exercise influence on planning, budgeting, and location of projects. - plays a crucial role in the selection of beneficiaries in important development schemes
Passive/Symbolic Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elected Women Representatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Merely physical presence - Often exercise their constituents interest through de facto participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spectator, voiceless - Participates in beneficiaries selection but concerns are being suppressed
Co-opted Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Independent ER - Neutral & first-time elected representatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Submissive to the first groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participates in few relevant discussions concerning their ward but gets diluted and co-opted

Source: Fieldwork

Category-I: Active Participation

The representatives belonging to this category are having elite backgrounds, party affiliations, clan domination and experience in the political field. Political sponsorship is the biggest asset for this group in operating the panchayat functions. Owing to their social background, they are more vocal and actively participate in decision-making process. They actively participate in the planning, budgeting, location of projects, awarding contracts, developmental works and in beneficiaries' selection. The majority of the representatives of this category, actively take part in awarding contracts and beneficiary selection. What is a more interesting fact is that this category of representatives along with the Panchayat officials decides how to spend the funds and where to spend, and in which head the funds are to be spent. They actively take part in all the decision-making processes related to the financial matters of the Panchayat.

Category-II: Passive/Symbolical Participation

Primarily elected women representatives represent this category. Despite their social background, their participation in decision-making is limited to symbolic participation. Interestingly they attend the panchayat meetings but hardly articulate their views. So, their participation is confined to merely physical presence. There are many sides of the story that kept the women representatives aloof in the decision-making process. First, the majority of the elected women

representatives (EWR) are not aware of the panchayat functioning. Secondly, even though they wanted to raise the concern of their wards, language obstructs their presentation. Thirdly, the majority of the elected women representatives expressed their views that their concerns in the decision-making process are being suppressed and diluted deliberately by the first category, which demotivates them further. In spite of the hurdles, few representatives try to push their voices through de facto representation. Therefore, the elected representatives from the second category generally find no reason to participate in the Panchayat activities.

Category III: Co-opted Participation

This category represents the neutral, independent and first-time elected representatives. Neutral and independent refers to the non-affiliation and non-association with a political party. Mostly the representatives join in panchayat politics because of the persuasions of others. Therefore, their nature of participation in decision-making is submissive to others. Since their scope of participation in decision-making is limited by virtue of their inexperience in the panchayat functions, they bank on the first group for the articulation of their voice and easily get co-opted. The degree of alignment of their interests is shaped by the first group.

C. Accountability of the Representatives towards their Constituents

Accountability in Panchayat primarily refers to giving an account of the representative or Panchayat as a whole in which both have to disseminate the information on what the elected representatives of Panchayat have done so far for the betterment of the wards/Panchayat. It is in this context the office bearers or elected representatives of the Panchayat are held responsible for their actions and performance. Transparency and accountability to the people were observed to be the least important issues when it comes to financial matters in Panchayats. Interestingly it was noted that the Panchayat functionaries express reluctance to disclose the financial resources of the Panchayat.

Consultation and seeking the opinion of the constituents with regard to several development projects seem to be an over-hyped discourse but it is essential in representative democracy. There is a range of intricacies in seeking opinions and consultation with the constituents with regard to the planning and implementation of various projects. To substantiate the arguments, the interaction was held among the elected representatives and citizens and it was observed that the majority of the representatives do not consult the constituents for their opinion while taking any decision or implementation of a project. The pertinent common issues that prevent the wisdom of the elected representative are the diverse issues in the village. Secondly, in each ward, each citizen has their own set of problems, which often become difficult to address. On such occasions, most of the development projects are being implemented by the Panchayats without the knowledge of the beneficiaries of the programmes, as well as not relevant to the populations.

VI.CONCLUSION

Effective articulation of the voice and interests of the constituents requires meaningful participation by the representatives in the local governance institutions. The representatives can articulate the problems of the constituents only when they involve themselves constructively in the Panchayat meetings. But the reality reflected a situation, where the engagement of the majority of the elected representatives in the Panchayats was merely confined to attendance in the Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings, and behaving as

a mute spectator to support the pre-determined agenda of dominant political groups. The dominant group in the Panchayat seems to prioritize their own (self) interest rather than articulating the 'group interest' of the community. The empirical data on account of the functioning of grassroots democracy (local self-governance) in the fifth scheduled areas delineate that in the study Panchayat the 'institutional capacity' to accommodate the views and voice of the cross-section of the elected representatives is hindered by the influence by political parties, highhandedness of government officials, and manipulation by village elites, clan domination and institutional disability. Among the factors, clan domination is an important phenomenon which controls the Panchayat politics and acts as a pressure group.

Therefore, empirical findings of the participation, representation and responsiveness of the representatives to articulate the interest of the constituents were found to be delusion in the study Panchayat. Conversely, the notion of better representation by the same group who share similar characteristics could not amplify the representation of their constituents. So, the representation of the tribal representative to their constituents is merely confined to affirmative action, rather than going beyond the actual spirit of the PESA Act. Deepening democratic principles, ensuring greater accountability and some sort of incentivisation to the elected representative may perhaps reduce the excessive indulgence of a few groups.

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