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QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE IN GRAM PANCHAYATS: EVIDENCE FROM KARNATAKA

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ABSTRACT

The argument for decentralised governance has emerged on the premise that local government, located close to the people and thus having information advantage, is able to assess the situation of the people, identify and prioritise their needs, formulate plans that reflect the needs and aspirations of the people and implement them in an effective manner. In the Indian context, the Gram Sabha is an important institutional mechanism that will enable the people to participate in the identification and prioritisation of needs, preparation of plans according to needs and preferences of the people. In other words, quality of governance is promoted through the regular meetings of the Gram Sabha and other institutions. In this context, the paper discusses the quality of governance at the Gram Panchayat level in Karnataka with the help of data collected from five districts that are different in agro-climatic features and development status. The quality of governance is measured in terms of functioning of various statutory institutions in the Gram Panchayats such as Ward and Gram Sabha meetings, constitution and functioning of standing and other sub-committees, conduct of Panchayat meetings, etc. The paper concludes that there is some improvement in the governance in the last one decade or so. At the same time, there is much to be improved in terms of functioning of local institutions, awareness on these institutions and people's participation.

Keywords: Decentralisation Governance in Karnataka, Participation in Gram Sabha, Participatory Planning.

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Introduction

Decentralisation is a process that transfers political, administrative and fiscal responsibilities to the local elected bodies, and also empowers communities to ensure that these bodies function effectively (Rajasekhar, 2012). Decentralisation is expected to result in good development outcomes. The decentralised government, being closer to the people, is in more advantageous position to obtain information on the situation, problems and needs of the people. It is also argued that elected leaders to decentralised government have incentives to formulate plans according to the needs and preferences of the people, and implement them in such a way that the people, in general, and their constituency, in particular, benefit from such need-based and decentralised plans (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998; Manor, 1999; Rondinelli et al.,1989; Kulipossa, 2004). Political argument that is often made in support of decentralised government is that decentralisation promotes true democracy by way of enabling the participation of the people in the governance and accountability (Rondinelli, 1983; Kulipossa, 2004; Sharma, 2006). From the fiscal angle, Oates (1972) argues that local planning provides cost-efficient services as local government considers local preferences more carefully than the case with the Central government.

Decentralised government is expected to contribute to poverty reduction in a number of ways (Johnson, 2001). First, democratisation and empowerment of local elected bodies will lead to participation of the people, especially by those belonging to the disadvantaged groups (Crook and Sverrisson 2001; Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor 1998). Frequent elections to decentralised government, introduction of transparency mechanisms and devolution of political powers have the potential to empower the poor and enabling their participation in local decision- making, and holding the government officials accountable for their actions (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998; Manor 1999; Rondinelli et al., 1989). Policies of providing reservations to disadvantaged groups of women and depressed castes, as in the case of India, can help these disadvantaged groups to have a voice in the local bodies (Crook and Manor, 1998). Because of these, local elected government is expected to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of public officials (Blair, 2000; Crook and Sverrisson, 2001; Crook and Manor, 1998; Manor 1999).

The authority to impose taxes and spend the revenue is also expected to result in good development outcomes. The decentralised government is expected to strengthen the relationship between elected leaders and people through the mechanisms of payment of taxes and voting in the elections. The elected leaders will have to incorporate the needs and preferences of the people in the planning and implementation of development plans; otherwise, voters can refuse payment of taxes and defeat the leaders who are not accountable to citizens in the election. Accountability of elected leaders can further be enhanced through people's organisations such as community-based organisations (Blair, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998;

Manor, 1999; Rondinelli et al., 1989). These inherent strengths have contributed to the introduction of democratic decentralisation in a number of developing countries, especially since 1990s (Manor, 1999). India and Karnataka are no exceptions to this general trend.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) was passed in 1992 and this was hailed as an important landmark for its radical approach towards decentralisation, devolution of power and in ensuring the participation of the marginalised sections. The CAA sought to bring a new political system in rural areas by giving priority to decentralised political institutions, people's participation in local governance and planning. The CAA adopted a three-tier model with democratically elected governments at the village, block/taluk and district levels. The CAA has also provided for the Gram Sabha (for promoting people's participation in planning and implementation), reservation of seats for women and those belonging to SC, ST and backward castes, mandatory elections once in five years and so on. Karnataka State had incorporated many of the important provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) in its new Panchayat Raj Act, 1993. The important provisions included are - constitution of State Election Commission, State Finance Commission and District Planning Committees (part of 74th Amendment).

It is often stated in the literature on decentralisation in India that the links between the democratic decentralisation and poverty reduction are weak because of limited decentralisation. The decentralisation has also not contributed to reduction in regional inequality. Studies show that the promise of devolution of powers, functionaries and finances is not getting reflected at the ground level leading to limited participation or exit of the people, and cooption and capture. Against this background, Karnataka has initiated decentralisation reforms in the State.

Decentralisation Reforms in Karnataka

The Panchayats in Karnataka have been in place for almost 22 years since 73rd Amendment. Elections to these institutions were held since 1993. Election to Gram Panchayats (GPs) was held for the fifth time in May 2015, while Taluk Panchayat (TP) and Zilla Panchayat (ZP) elections were held in February 2016. The period from 2010 to 2015 is interesting in the history of panchayats in Karnataka because the new regime that took over Gram Panchayats in June, 2010 was better placed as far as the policy framework is concerned.

In the recent years, many reforms and policies have been introduced by the government in response to the criticism that PRIs in Karnataka are weak in terms of political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation. These reforms and policies are aimed at strengthening the Panchayats and thereby making them more responsive to the problems, and transparent and accountable for the actions. In Karnataka, the Gram Panchayats among the three-tiers were specially targeted for the special treatment. The strengthening of GPs occurred under the domains of functions, functionaries and finances.

It may be noted that until the mid-2000s, the GPs were the weakest among the three-tier Panchayat system. They had very limited functions, inadequate and incapable administrative staff, inadequate and unpredictable resources. The strengthening of GPs began in the year 2004-05 when the State government undertook the activity mapping of functions of three-tier Panchayats. As a result of this exercise, the GPs were assigned quite a large number of programmes/schemes (including development oriented) during 2004-05 and 2005-06. During these years, some 30 schemes were assigned to GPs (Babu, 2010). A major part of MGNREGS implementation is also placed on the shoulders of GPs. In addition to their own revenue, GPs received statutory and non-statutory grants from the higher level governments. The State government's statutory grant which was around ₹ 3.5 lakh per annum till mid 2000s has since been enhanced to ₹ 8 lakh to ₹ 12 lakh per year (from 2011-12). Thus, the major income of GPs include own tax and non-tax revenue, State's statutory grant, MGNREGS grant from the Centre and Union Finance Commission grants.

With regard to functionaries, there used to be only one full-time government official called Secretary, who was in the rank of Second/ First Division Assistant. This official was expected to shoulder the entire burden of administration of the GP, preparation of budget and plans and execution of plans. However, since 2009, the State government created a separate Panchayat cadre making a beginning in this direction by recruiting and posting an upgraded personnel to GPs and is designated as Panchayat Development Officer (Deputy Tahsildar grade) in place of Secretary. Further, a Junior Engineer was provided for about 5-6 GPs whose duty is to provide technical guidance in project planning and execution. The GPs are also allowed to engage professionals in accounts maintenance and computer work. Again, very recently, the salary of ad hoc employees of GPs such as bill (tax) collector was enhanced from about ₹ 1,000 per month to about ₹ 5,000 per month.

Again, the Central government also initiated certain measures in recent times to make Panchayats work and deliver services and infrastructure with long-term vision. In this direction, major initiation has come in the area of planning. It may be observed that till 2008, the States either not constituted the District Planning Committees or where constituted they remained non-functional (Planning Commission, 2002; Oommen, 2002; Babu, 2007). Till 10th Five Year Plan, there were no medium or perspective plans prepared at the sub-State level combining both rural and urban plans except in Kerala State. Keeping the urgency and usefulness of long-term plans and vision for the district, the Centre/ Planning Commission took measures for preparation of 11th Five Year Plan (2007-12) by local governments (three-tier Panchayats and urban bodies). In Karnataka, except a very few districts, all other districts complied with this and prepared five year plans (Comprehensive District Development Plan). These plans were discussed and approved by the respective DPCs/Zilla Panchayats. To encourage the Panchayats perform better, the Centre instituted what is known as

incentive scheme. The first in this direction is 'Nirmal Gram Puraskar' which is a cash award given for Panchayats (all tiers) for 100 per cent achievement in sanitation under the programme 'Total Sanitation Campaign.' In 2010, the Centre adopted another similar scheme known as the 'Panchayat Empowerment and Accountability Incentive Scheme' (PEAIS), whose objective is to provide cash award for the best Panchayat (three tiers) annually in every State. In Karnataka, one ZP (₹ 25 lakh), two TPs (₹ 18 lakh each) and four GPs (₹ 13 lakh each) received the cash award on April 24, 2012 from the President of India for the year 2011-12.

Objectives and Methodology

As a result of all these facilitative factors, it is expected that the GPs would provide effective governance and this will in turn lead to better assessment of resources, long-term vision and planning and increased outcomes as compared to earlier regimes. The paper seeks to examine the influence of these facilitative factors on the quality of governance at the Gram Panchayat level. The quality of governance is measured in terms of functioning of various statutory institutions in the Gram Panchayat such as Ward and Gram Sabha meetings, constitution and functioning of Standing and other sub-committees, Panchayat meetings, etc.

This study has been carried out in the specific context of Karnataka Gram Panchayats. The analysis is based on the primary and secondary data collected from the selected GPs and sample households. The methodology adopted for the selection of districts, villages and households is given below.

In all, five districts from Karnataka, namely Dakshina Kannada, Dharwad, Gulbarga, Kolar and Mandya were selected on the basis of development status. Dakshina Kannada is one of the most developed districts with high human development index, while Gulbarga represents the backward category of districts. These districts also represent the different geographical locations. On the basis of the available literature, we categorised Dakshina Kannada as highly developed district, Dharwad as developed district, Mandya as irrigated district, Kolar district as transient and closer to State capital and Gulbarga as the backward district. The Nanjundappa's Committee report was used in the selection of one medium developed taluk from each of these districts.

From each taluk, two Gram Panchayats were randomly selected. Two villages were purposively selected from each GP by adopting the criterion of distance – one is GP headquarters and the other is the farthest from the GP headquarters. The village housing GP office was selected as GP headquarters village, and the second village was the farthest one from the GP headquarters village. From each village, 20 households were randomly selected by adopting systematic random sampling technique. In all, we collected data from 404 households of 20 villages in the jurisdiction of 10 GPs. Structured questionnaires were canvassed among the selected households of the selected GPs. The reference period of study was 2013-14.

Legal Provision for Ward and Gram Sabhas

In India, Gram Sabha below the Gram/ Village Panchayat is a village assembly/council. The members of Gram Sabha consist of all those adults whose names have been registered in the voters list of the village. Gram Sabha is an institutional space created within the local government for structured interactions between citizen and the policymakers (elected leaders and officials).

Article 243 of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act provides for creation of Gram Sabha, which consist of persons registered in the electoral rolls pertaining to a village coming under the jurisdiction of the Panchayat. With regard to powers and functions of Gram Sabha, the Constitution left it to the respective States to specify. Article 243(A) mentions that a Gram Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of a State may, by law, provide.

The broad intention of having an institution like Gram Sabha at the grassroots level is to maximise opportunities for poor and socially marginalised groups, and to exert influence over policy choice, resource allocation and programme design (Robinson, 1998: 153). The Gram Sabha at the grassroots level facilitates participatory governance and planning since the elected representatives, officials and the citizens are expected to participate in it. This platform enables the lowest rung of government (Village/ Grama Panchayat) to plan and implement the local development projects according to the needs and aspirations of the people. In other words, planning and expenditure priorities arrived at by citizens and local officials through participatory procedure better reflect local preferences. Greater citizen participation in local budget decisions, spending choices and development planning yield greater citizen satisfaction with basic services and more coverage for previously excluded groups, particularly the poor, minorities and women, thus moving toward more inclusive governance (Babu et al., 2011: 214). Through Gram Sabha, the citizens exercise voice, and demand accountability and transparency of local officials in their administration and development. Thus, in a nutshell, Gram Sabha paves the way for people-centered development.

Besley et al., (2008: 253) mention the two ways in which Gram Sabha may improve the working of the local government. "First, relative to elected representatives, these meetings may better reflect citizens' preferences on issues such as how to target resources to the neediest groups. Second, by providing a forum for monitoring the actions of elected representatives, they may reduce agency problems in politics, and the extent of corruption."

Complying with the mandatory constitutional provision for Gram Sabha, the Karnataka government incorporated Gram Sabha in its new KPR Act, 1993. As per this Act, all those aged above 18 years and whose names are registered in the village voters list are its members. Initially, Gram Sabhas were to be held in each of the revenue villages. Having village level Gram Sabhas and GP level Gram Sabhas used to create

confusion among the people and resulted in underrepresentation of vulnerable groups in the final Gram Sabhas where the key decisions are taken. In order to strengthen the decentralisation process in Karnataka, the Government of Karnataka had set up a working group on decentralisation in 2002. Accordingly, this committee included Gram Sabhas as one of the thrust areas. With regard to Gram Sabhas, this committee had recommended the following changes in the KPR Act (GoK 2002).

- In order to clear the confusion about the Gram Sabha meetings specific to revenue villages and Gram Sabha meeting specific to entire Gram Panchayat, the Committee proposed for the constitution of Ward (vasathi) Sabhas. The Ward Sabha meetings may be held for the voters of each constituency held by elected member of the Panchayat. This forum would give an opportunity for more intense and meaningful participation of the people.
- With the introduction of the Ward Sabhas, the committee recommended that Gram Sabha meetings relates to Panchayat as a whole, rather than relating to any particular village. Thus, the Gram Sabha consists of all the voters in a Gram Panchayat.

To strengthen these institutions, the State government has brought out certain amendments in the year 2004. As per this amendment, a minimum of two Ward Sabhas at the ward (constituency) level and two Gram Sabhas at the Panchayat level have to be held in a year. Various functions such as review of Panchayat finances, development plans, audit report, implementation and monitoring of programmes, identification of beneficiaries, etc., have been entrusted to Ward and Gram Sabhas. The main intention of such institutions is to involve local people in the Panchayat activities, particularly in the plan formulation, implementation and monitoring (Babu et al., 2011). Thus, Ward and Gram Sabhas play a key role in incorporating the governance principles in the implementation of development programmes.

Both Ward Sabhas and Gram Sabhas should be held once in six months. The quorum of Ward Sabha meeting should "not be less than one-tenth of the total number of members of the ward sabha or 20 members", while the quorum of Gram Sabha is "not less than one-tenth of the total number of members of the Gram Sabha or hundred members, whichever is less" (Puliani, 2014: 27 & 29).

As per the KPR Act, 1993, the other important forum mandated is periodic meeting of GP members. The Gram Panchayat has to hold at least one meeting in a month. In addition, the GP has to constitute standing committees numbering three (Amenities, Production and Social Justice) and these committees should hold the meetings as per the byelaws laid down by the GP. The State government introduced Jamabandi meeting (social audit) which should be held once in a year at the GP office/ headquarters. Jamabandi meetings are important as there is general expectation that rural local governance should be inclusive to ensure the participation of every citizen in the decision-making irrespective of social and economic background (Sivanna, 2014).

Having provided the constitutional and legislative status to Ward and Gram Sabhas, GP meetings, standing committees and Jamabandi meeting, let us now proceed to examine how these institutions are functioning. In the next section, we will examine the functioning of these institutions with the help of data collected from the selected GPs and in the third section, people's responses on the extent to which they have participated in the Ward and Gram Sabha meetings have been analysed.

Conduct of Ward and Gram Sabhas: An Analysis

Ward Sabha Meetings

The data on number of Ward Sabha meetings and number of persons attending these meetings were collected from the records of the selected GPs. It is to be noted that this information is not available for the two GPs from the backward district for all the years. As mentioned below, the data were not available for a few years in the case of other districts as well. This shows the seriousness with which the data on important institution are maintained.

Table 1 shows that 200 Ward Sabha meetings were held in eight GPs (excluding two GPs for which data are not available) during the five-year period ending with 2009-10.This period was the same of the tenure of the previous GP. According to the GP records, the total number of persons attending the Ward Sabha meetings was 7,371. During the two-year period from 2010-11 to 2011-12, the total number of Ward Sabha meetings in eight GPs was 102 and number of persons attending was 2,828. Given that there is variation in the number of years, it would be better to compare the average number of persons attending each Ward Sabha meeting.

Table 1: Citizen Participation in Ward Sabha Meetings in the Selected Gram Panchayats of Karnataka

	2005-06 to 2009-10			2010-11 to 2011-12		
District	Number of Ward Sabha meetings held	Total number of persons attending the meetings	Average number of persons attending a Ward Sabha	Number of Ward Sabha meetings held	Total number of persons attending the meetings	Average number of persons attending a Ward Sabha
Highly developed	28	1776	63	5	234	47
Developed	17	562	33	25	715	29
Irrigated	94	3141	33	27	743	28
Transient	61	1892	31	45	1136	25
Backward			NA			
Total	200	7371	37	102	2828	28

Source: Data collected from the respective GP records.
Notes: 1) Information not available for both the GPs from backward district and one of the GPs from the developed district.
2) Information was also not available for one GP from the highly developed district in 2011-12, irrigated district for 2005-06 and two GPs in the transient district for two years of 2009-10 and 2007-08.

It can be seen from Table 1 that the average number of persons who attended the Ward Sabha has declined from 37 during the period 2005-06 to 2009-10 to 28 during the period 2010-11 to 2011-12. The average number of Ward Sabha meetings getting postponed on account of lack of quorum has, however, remained roughly the same around four across the two sub-periods. This suggests that people are not very keen to attend Ward Sabha meetings. With regard to number of Ward Sabhas to be held as per mandate it should be at least two in each ward in a year. However, due to lack of information on the number of wards in the selected GPs, this issue cannot be highlighted here.

Gram Sabhas

Panchayati Raj Act provides legal legitimacy to participatory governance by making the provision for Gram Sabha meetings (Sivanna 2014). The information relating to the number of GPs held and the extent of citizen participation in the selected GPs is provided in Table 2. It can be seen from the Table, a total of 56 Gram Sabhas were conducted by all the 10 GPs during five-year period from 2005-06 to 2009-10. The average number of Gram Sabhas held in a year comes to just one instead of two. The Table further reveals that in the highly developed, developed and irrigated districts, Gram Sabha meetings were held more than two in a year. It is in the transient and backward districts that GPs are not bothered to conduct Gram Sabhas as required under KPR Act, 1993. The same is the position during 2010-11 and 2011-12 as far as the number of Gram Sabhas held and the pattern across the districts.

With regard to citizens' participation, Table 2 shows that the average number of persons attending a Gram Sabha meeting increased from 94 during the first period to 117 in the second period. However, this has not been uniform across the GPs. Such an increase became possible only because of the sample GPs from the developed districts where a number of Gram Sabha meetings were held to explain the provisions under MGNREGS. This explains why the average number of meetings went up.

Table 2: Number and Participation of Citizens in the Gram Sabhas in Selected Gram Panchayats of Karnataka

District	2005-06 to 2009-10			2010-11 to 2011-12		
	Total number of Gram Sabha meetings held	Total number of persons attending the meetings	Average number of persons attending the Gram Sabha	Total number of Gram Sabha meetings held	Total number of persons attending the meetings	Average number of persons attending the Gram Sabha
Highly developed	33	4320	131	15	1524	102
Developed	12	464	39	17	2415	142
Irrigated	8	376	47	2	36	18
Transient	3	87	29	NA		
Backward	2	42	21	NA		
Total	56	5247	94	34	3975	117

Source: Data collected from the respective GP records.
Notes: 1) Information was not available for both the GPs from backward district for the period of 2010-11 to 2011-12 and also for several years during the previous period.
2) In the case of developed district, information was not available for one GP for the period 2005-06 to 2009-10 and for another during 2008-09.
3) Data were also not available for the transient and irrigated districts for a few years.

As per quorum rules, a minimum of 100 people should attend a Gram Sabha meeting. But, except in the highly developed and developed districts, the quorum is not maintained in the other districts. But, it needs to be noted that, notwithstanding this, there was no significant improvement in the functioning of Gram Sabhas during this period.

Participation of People in Ward and Gram Sabhas

Ward Sabha

Of the sample households, about 70 per cent of them were not aware of Ward Sabha meetings. The proportion of households not aware of Ward Sabha meetings was considerably high in the backward (86.9 per cent) and irrigated (86.3 per cent) districts (Table 3). Three important reasons were provided for lack of awareness of Ward Sabha: (a) Households were not informed about the date and timings of Ward Sabha meetings; (b) Some of the households reported that Ward Sabha meetings were never held in their villages; (c) A few respondents (especially women) stated that they are not aware of Ward Sabha meetings, however, they were of the opinion that the male members of their households may be aware of the Ward Sabhas.

Table 3: Awareness of and Participation in Ward Sabhas by the Sample Households

	Particulars	Highly Deve-loped	Deve-loped	Irrigated	Transient	Back-ward	Total (N=404)
1	Households (%) stating that they are aware of Ward Sabha	58.75	40.00	13.75	25.00	13.10	29.95
2	Households (%) stating that they have attended Ward Sabha meeting	42.55	50.00	63.64	70.00	18.18	48.76
Reasons for not attending the Ward Sabha meeting [N=62]							
a	No Ward Sabhas are held	0.00	31.25	25.00	50.00	66.67	24.19
b	Preoccupied with livelihood concerns	22.22	43.75	0.00	16.67	0.00	22.58
c	Male members of the HH will attend	25.93	6.25	50.00	16.67	0.00	17.74
d	Not interested to attend	18.52	12.5	0.00	0.00	0.00	11.29
e	Our needs/requests are never considered	3.70	0.00	0.00	0.00	11.11	3.23
f	Other household members will attend	18.52	0.00	0.00	0.00	11.11	9.68
g	Others	11.11	6.25	25.00	16.67	11.11	11.29

About 30 per cent of the sample households stated that they were aware of Ward Sabha meetings. The awareness of Ward Sabha meeting was relatively better in the highly developed district (58.8 per cent). It was reported that people were informed about the date and timings of Ward Sabha meetings through different modes of communication such as through dandora/tom-tom, making public announcements and sending information through Gram Panchayat members/officials. When we asked the sample households whether they have attended any of the Ward Sabha meetings in the last two-and-half years before our survey, it was found that more than half of the sample households who were aware of Ward Sabha meetings never attended the meetings. Following reasons were provided for not attending Ward Sabha meetings:

(i) It was stated that in some of the GPs, Ward Sabhas were never held. This phenomenon was observed mostly in backward, developed and transient districts.

(ii) A few households stated that they were not interested in attending Gram Sabha meetings as they were preoccupied with their livelihood concerns.

(iii) Some of the women respondents stated that only male members of their household attend the Ward Sabha meetings.

Of the households who have attended the Ward Sabha meetings most of them attended to ask for a benefit such as housing benefit or to present problems relating to roads, drinking water, drainage, etc.

Gram Sabha

Now let us understand the extent of awareness of Gram Sabhas and the extent of participation of people in them. As can be seen from Table 4, more than half of the sample households were aware of Gram Sabha meetings. In fact, proportion of households knowing about Gram Sabha meetings was much higher than those aware of Ward Sabhas. In other words, in general, people are more aware of Gram Sabha meetings as compared to Ward Sabha meetings. This implies that the conduct of Gram Sabha is more frequent as compared to Ward Sabhas.

Expectedly, sample households from the highly developed district had a better awareness on Gram Sabha meetings followed by those from the developed district. In contrast, the awareness of Gram Sabha meetings in the irrigated, transient and backward districts was relatively lower.

Table 4: Awareness of and Participation in Gram Sabhas by the Sample Households

	Particulars	Highly Deve-loped	Deve-loped	Irrigated	Transient	Back-ward	Total (N=404)
1	Households (%) stating that they are aware of Gram Sabha	77.50	61.25	45.00	46.25	48.81	55.69
2	Households (%) stating that they have attended Gram Sabha meeting	36.59	30.61	44.44	51.35	17.07	38.67
3	Reasons for not attending the Gram Sabha meeting			[N=138]			
a	No Gram Sabhas are held	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.94	0.72
b	Preoccupied with livelihood concerns	34.38	41.18	50.00	33.33	23.53	35.51
c	Male members of the household will Attend	21.88	11.76	0.00	5.56	8.82	10.87
d	Not interested to attend	15.63	11.76	30.00	5.56	8.82	13.77
e	Our needs/requests are never considered	3.13	17.65	0.00	5.56	20.59	10.87
f	Other household members will attend	15.63	2.94	0.00	0.00	5.88	5.80
g	Lack of information	9.38	8.82	15.00	50.00	8.82	15.22
h	Disruptive fights in the meeting	0.00	2.94	0.00	0.00	17.65	5.07
i	Others	0.00	2.94	5.00	0.00	2.94	2.17

Among the sample households who reported that they were not aware of Gram Sabha meetings, a majority of residents stated that they do not have any information relating to Gram Sabha meetings. Some of the households stated that this could be because of non-conduct of Gram Sabha meetings and most often Gram Panchayat members and officials themselves conduct some meetings. In fact, irregular conduct of Gram Sabha meetings is often pointed out in the literature for the last two decades (Bhargava and Raphael, 1994; Aziz et al., 2002; Babu, 2005; Besley, Pande and Rao, 2008 and Rajasekhar et al., 2012). This implies that the quality of governance has not improved at least in terms of regularity of Gram Sabha meetings.

A few sample households stated that they did not bother about these meetings because they were busy with their livelihood concerns. As far as mode of communication to inform about Gram Sabha meeting is concerned, announcing through dandora/tom-tom and distribution of pamphlets are commonly used. In addition, information was also provided through Gram Panchayat members and staff. This shows that there was no major difference in the mode of communication for providing information on Gram Sabhas and Ward Sabhas. Only 39 per cent of the sample households, who were aware of Gram Sabha meetings, had attended the meetings during the last two-and-half years before our survey. This proportion was comparatively high in the highly developed district, while it was least in the backward district. It was evident that people attended the Gram Sabha meetings basically to ask for benefit or to present the problems relating to basic amenities. Interestingly, about 25 per cent of the households stated that they attended the meeting out of curiosity to find out what would be discussed in these meetings. About two per cent of households, especially from the developed district, reported that they were forced to attend the meetings.

We had asked our sample households about their perception on the conduct of Gram Sabha meetings in the last two years (2010-11 and 2011-12). About 19 per cent of the households termed the conduct of Gram Sabha meetings as regular (Table 5). Only one per cent of the sample households from backward district stated that the Gram Sabha meetings were conducted regularly. About seven per cent of the households remarked that Gram Sabhas were conducted irregularly. What is interesting is that nearly 74 per cent of the sample households were not willing to tell about the conduct of Gram Sabha meetings in their GPs. They gave a safe response as "don't know." This suggests that Gram Sabha meetings were either not conducted regularly or participation of people was low in such meetings. Inbanathan (2000) also notes that only a few people in the village attend Gram Sabhas and these meetings are convened as only a formality. Sivanna and Gayathridevi (2012) found the practice of making women belonging to Dalit castes to sit separately in Gram Sabha meetings in some of the backward districts. Such practices also adversely affect people's participation.

Table 5: Responses from the Sample Households on the Regularity in the Conduct of Gram Sabha and Special Gram Sabha Meetings

Particulars	Highly Developed	Developed	Backward (N=404)	Transient	Irrigated	Total
Regularity in the Conduct of Gram Sabhas						
Regular	28.8	17.5	1.2	28.8	21.3	19.3
Irregular	7.5	7.5	6.0	6.3	7.5	6.9
Don't Know	63.8	75.0	92.9	65.0	71.3	73.8
Whether Special Gram Sabha Conducted						
Yes	6.3	12.5	1.2	17.5	8.8	9.2
No	50.0	55.0	56.0	63.8	73.8	59.7
Don't Know	43.8	32.5	42.9	18.8	17.5	31.2

With regard to special Gram Sabha (for children) meeting, only nine per cent of the sample households gave a positive response that special Gram Sabha meetings were conducted in their Gram Panchayat. Remaining sample households either stated that there were no special Gram Sabha meeting or responded that they did not know about special Gram Sabha meetings.

Gram Panchayat Meetings

As per KPR Act, 1993, a GP has to hold a meeting of its members at least once in a month. The information on the number of GP meetings (Table 6) shows that the average number of GP meetings held went up from eight in the first period to 12 in the second period. This shows that the functioning of GPs has improved over the period. However, the functioning of GPs in transient and backward districts as far as in conducting monthly general meetings was not at all satisfactory during 2005 term and the same status continued in the latter term albeit with some improvement.

Table 6: Number of GP Meetings Held in the Selected Gram Panchayats of Karnataka

District	2005-06 to 2009-10		2010-11 to 2011-12	
	Total number of GP meetings held	Average number of meetings per year	Total number of GP meetings held	Average number of meetings per year
Highly developed	38	8	17	9
Developed	51	10	34	17
Irrigated	70	14	31	16
Transient	30	6	22	11
Backward	11	2	13	7
Total	200	8	117	12

Source: Data collected from the respective GP records.

Standing Committees

The standing committees within the GP play an important role in the governance and planning. As it is possible to discuss specific issues threadbare in these committee meetings, taking a final decision becomes easy in the GP meetings. The data collected from the selected GPs show that the standing committees such as Production, Amenities and Social Justice were constituted in five selected GPs. The information on the dates on which these committees were constituted was not provided for both the GPs from the developed and backward district, and one GP from the transient district.

In one of the GPs in the highly developed district, these committees were constituted in 2005, 2007 and 2010. In the other GP, they were constituted only twice; once in 2005 and the second time in 2010. The same was the case with one of the GPs from the irrigated district. In the other two GPs, the data show that they were constituted only once.

The data also show that the sample GPs from the highly developed district have constituted the other committees such as biodiversity management committee, gram sanitation committee, village health committee, food committee, forest committee and rural water supply and sanitation committee.

None of the selected GPs provided information on date of meetings of these committees, attendance and decisions taken/ resolutions passed. This shows that the statutory committees have not been constituted in all the GPs. Even if they are constituted, they do not seem to be meeting to take decisions concerning the production, amenities and social justice. In a study carried out in Mandya and Gulbarga districts, Inbanathan (2001) notes that majority of the male elected members stated that the standing committees were not functioning, while their female counterparts were not even aware of any standing committees. He further notes that the role of standing committees cannot be overlooked in the overall functioning of the Panchayats (ibid).

Jamabandi Meetings

Only one GP from the highly developed district has provided information on number of *jamabandi* meetings held, number of GP members and taluk-level officials present and public participation in the meetings. It has been shown that one meeting was held every year from 2008-09 onwards. The total number of public attending the meeting ranged from 15 to 34. A couple of officials attended the meeting. In general, all the elected members have attended the meetings. In the case of all the other GPs, this information was simply not available, thus indicating that these meetings may not have been held in GPs.

Conclusion and Policy Suggestions

We have discussed the quality of governance in the sample Gram Panchayats by measuring the quality in terms of functioning of various sub-institutions within the Panchayat like Ward and Gram Sabhas, standing and other sub-committees, Panchayat meetings, etc.

We conclude that the governance at the local level has improved during the period from 2005/6-2009/10 to 2011/2-2012/3.The average number of persons attending Gram Sabha meetings has gone up from 94 to 117, and the number of GP meetings held in a year has increased from eight to 12 during this period. An important reason for this is the introduction of MGNREGS, which makes it necessary for the regular conduct of Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat meetings for providing awareness, identification of projects, social audit and so on.

However, there are some issues in the governance at the local level.The data collected from the sample GPs show that the information on the functioning of these sub-institutions is not maintained properly. This suggests that the institutions might not have functioned; hence, no data are maintained. Another explanation could be that GPs assign low importance to data.

It can be concluded that people are not well aware of the meetings of these institutions. People's participation also tended to be low.More importantly, over two decades of democratic decentralisation in the State has not contributed to reduction in regional inequality.The awareness of people on institutions promoting good governance at the local level and their participation in them tended to be high in developed district as compared to backward district. Lower levels of participation of people in Gram Sabha meetings in backward districts result in limited interaction between elected representatives and people which, in turn, results in lack of responsiveness and accountability (Inbanathan, 2001).

Based on the evidence presented and findings arrived at, the following policy suggestions can be made. There is a need to strengthen the quality of governance at the lowest level. The findings in this paper suggest that citizens are not attending the Ward and Gram Sabha meetings because of reasons such as pre-occupation with livelihood concerns, lack of interest, the perception that citizen needs are not usually considered in the planning and so on. In the light of these findings, there is a need to provide widespread awareness on the importance of Ward and Gram Sabha meetings. In addition, the planning process needs to be strengthened as an incentive for the people to participate in the Gram Sabha meetings. Planning process at the Gram Panchayat level is not given serious attention by the functionaries due to lack of sufficient untied funds. It is stated that in the absence of untied funds, they are unable to enthuse citizens to participate in the planning process. Hence, GPs need to have sufficient untied funds. Secondly, the GP level personnel do not have expertise in the conduct of planning meetings. In view of this, there is a need to establish a proper planning mechanism at the grassroots level with an expert in the planning process available to each GP for the plan preparation.Third,there is a need to develop the capacity of the functionaries in the preparation of plans. GPs need to maintain adequate data relating to the situation of people, resources, etc., and update the same periodically for the meaningful planning process at the local level.

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