

AN ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS OF RURAL PEOPLE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: A CASE STUDY ON THE ROLE OF GRAM SABHA IN NELLORE DISTRICT OF ANDHRA PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment provision empowers the gram sabha to function as a key institution of local self-governance, particularly significant for the economic development and social justice of its members. The gram sabha is the fulcrum for the local self-governance and devolution of the finances, functions, and functionaries is vital for the empowerment of people.

In this backdrop, this paper documents the outcome of the gram sabhas held in the coastal district, Nellore, covering 932 Gram Panchayats offers a baseline for implementation, planning and strategic changes for effective local self-governance. The study offers few policy suggestions including bringing all the grassroots level functionaries and elected representatives under the direct control of gram sabhas in addition to delegation of law enforcement functions to the gram sabhas to improve accountability. The paper lays a key emphasis on the need for increasing the territorial and demographic jurisdiction of local self-government institutions to make them financially sustainable to fulfill the constitutional intent for effective local self-governance. However, empowering the people through gram sabhas is not possible unless the existing both defacto and dejure challenges to strengthen the local governance units are not addressed.

Keywords: Gram Sabha, Local Self Governments, Local Administration.

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Introduction

Andhra Pradesh (AP) had 23 districts till its bifurcation into Telangana and AP in 2014. It now has nine districts in coastal Andhra and four in Rayalaseema, while 33 are in Telangana. The study district, officially known as Sri Potti Sriramulu Nellore District (hereafter referred to as Nellore district), is one of the coastal districts in the State.

According to the 2011 census, Nellore district has a population of 2,966,082 (29 percent- urban) with a density of 227 inhabitants per square kilometre (590/sq mi). The district has a sex ratio of 986 females for every 1000 males and a literacy rate of 69.15 per cent. Nellore district has 2,783 habitations and 932 Gram Panchayats with 71 per cent of the district population residing in rural areas. Each Gram Panchayat usually comprises of two to four habitations, while at least one habitation belongs to the weaker sections.

Constitutional Framework

Although Article 40 of the Indian Constitution, the Indian State made a commitment to establish Panchayat Raj system as the basis of self-governance. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (Amendment to Article 243) was passed by the Parliament in December, 1992 to declare Panchayats as institutions of self-government (is it self-governance). However, the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution were not extended to the Scheduled Areas of the country, significantly, the first time ever that

the Parliament did not extend a law in a routine manner to cover the Scheduled Areas. They had the clear injunctions to exclude the Fifth and Sixth Schedule areas from its purview under Article 243 M of the Constitution. The Parliament enacted the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Area (PESA) Act, 1996 to provide self-autonomy to the tribals in the Scheduled Areas of the country.

In the three-tier structure of panchayats, the village panchayat is at the lowest level. Article 243B states that "there shall be constituted in every State, panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels in accordance with the provisions of this part". 'Village' has been defined to mean a village or group of villages as may be specified by the Governor by public notification (Article 243G). However, PESA,1996 has a specific definition that is attributed to the term 'village'. The 'village' shall ordinarily consist of a habitation or a group of habitations or a hamlet or a group of hamlets. Further, every such village shall have a gram sabha. Thus, the study is in relation to the local self-governance structure and framework in the mainland areas of the State.

Objectives of the Study

This study makes an assessment of the potential needs of the rural people with respect to economic and social justice in Nellore, one of the coastal districts in Andhra Pradesh, and offers a baseline for implementation, planning and strategic changes for effective local

self-governance. The study also provides an assessment of the performance levels of the key departments i.e., police, revenue and rural development, and suggests appropriate local governance structures for strengthening the local administration.

Methodology

The study was based on both primary and secondary data. The important source of data is gram sabha resolutions of all the GPs in the study district. A review of resolutions of gram sabhas in the study district was undertaken to know the potential and priority needs of the people to assess the performance levels of local government institutions. The secondary sources are those available at the offices of Gram Panchayats, District Collectorate, and District Panchayat offices in the district. A review of literature on the subject was carried out to know the nuances of the implication of the role of gram sabha as envisaged under 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

Limitation

One limitation of this study is the low attendance of these gram sabhas which stands at around 9.34 per cent. It is known that the disadvantaged social groups attend the gram sabhas more than others (Besley, Pande, and Rao, 2005). Hence, the results reflect the needs and aspirations of the bottom-most strata of the society. The study does not reflect the role of the gram sabha, envisaged under Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Area (PESA) Act, 1996, which was extended to the

Vth Scheduled Areas of the country. Therefore, the policy suggestions will be useful only for the non-scheduled areas of the State. The gram sabha experiences in Nellore district are a result of intense and close monitoring of district-level officials in facilitating the functioning of the gram sabhas. Thus, the outcome of gram sabhas held in the study district cannot be attributed in general to the other parts of the State.

Review of Literature

Article 243 of the Constitution states that gram sabha comprises only the electors of the village. Gram sabha is widely recognised as an extremely critical institution in the realm of direct democracy, which brings about transparency and accountability in governance. The trend world over is that good governance is manifested through democratic decentralisation and minimum governance (Palanithurai, 2005). It is a political space where the ultimate consumers of government services, the citizens who are the subject of governance sit in judgement and provide direction to the government machinery. The local bodies are better informed about the citizens' needs than the State governments and are better placed to satisfy them (Kumar, 2006). Elements of direct democracy have been in existence in the West (ex: United States, Switzerland and so on) for a long time, operating through mechanisms such as plebiscites, referendums and so forth. Just as a legislative assembly and parliament are integral parts of the Constitution of India,

a gram sabha consisting exclusively of the village voters is also a creation of Article 243 of the Constitution, whose primary purpose is to oversee the delivery of services at the Panchayat level. Madhya Pradesh was the first Indian State to decentralise democracy and vest powers in the gram sabhas (Behar, 2001). However, desired results could not be achieved in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Karnataka and elsewhere in the country (Gupta, 2006) (Reddy and Acharya, 2007) (Malik, 2005) (Ray, 2009). State governments did not allow the local bodies to strengthen (Fernandes, 2003). The public goods were cornered by the elected representatives towards meeting their clientelist interests (Besley, Pande and Rao, 2012)

Gram sabhas in AP have been conducted in the last two decades either as local initiatives of district collectors or as programmes of the State government such as ***Rachhabanda***. These gram sabhas, though successful, were branded by State governments and used primarily for earning credibility for the ruling party. They were made a platform of partisan politics where identification of beneficiaries and disbursement of individual benefits were done with the active involvement of ruling party leaders. No effort was made to conduct gram sabhas as envisaged under the Constitution. Gram sabhas in AP have become defunct due to the lack of support from the State government (Babu, 2002). Successive State governments have been bypassing gram sabhas in the decision-making processes.

Though constitutional directives are clear, the devolution of financial and functional powers by States to the local bodies has been sub-optimal. It is suggested that gram sabhas should function assuming the powers of a State Legislature (Sodhi and Ramanujam, 2006). The gram sabha is capable of performing many powerful functions such as administrative, review, social audit, regulatory and decision-making, etc. in local administration. Gram sabha can provide inputs for planning social and physical infrastructure as well as government schemes in the pipeline, from the user's point of view (eg: irrigation canals, drinking water system, sewerage, pension schemes, etc.) (John and Chathukulam, 2002); "The 73rd constitutional amendment generated a lot of expectation and anticipated an entirely new culture." (DeSouza, 2003).

Therefore, the role of gram sabha is very crucial to understand the concerns and needs of the people and their priorities. This paper discusses the experience of conducting gram sabhas in Nellore district during January, 2014, in true letter and spirit of the Constitution, based on the empirical results it attempts to formulate a model of gram sabha which we should aim at achieving (Narain, 1965).

The devolution agenda including the agenda of fiscal devolution and tax decentralisation has not been taken up sincerely in many States including the States of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha (Reddy, Et al., 2017). Whenever functions and responsibilities

are transferred to the Panchayats, it should be ensured that the necessary funds, functionaries and freedom in decision-making also accompany such transfer (Government of India, 2014). The functionaries need to be accountable to the body responsible for the service so that there is a continuous line of accountability from citizen to government to provider (World Bank, 2006). The major issues of effective decentralisation in India are devolution of funds and functions and functionaries (3Fs), systems of transparency, accountability and governance systems put in place, availability of adequate infrastructure for local bodies, etc (Reddy, Et al., 2017). The devolution of powers between the State legislature and panchayats in the Indian Constitution is discretionary in nature. Therefore, the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment depends largely on the commitment of the respective State governments.

Methodology Followed for Facilitating the Conduct of Gram Sabhas (Village Assemblies)

For the first time, Government of Andhra Pradesh issued orders in 2013-14 stating that gram sabha meetings should be conducted covering all the 29 subjects in the Eleventh Schedule. Government orders mandated that gram sabha meetings need to be conducted once in every quarter. The primary objective of government orders is to ensure convergence, transparency and make the government

functionaries accountable at panchayat level in the implementation of all the socio-economic development programmes. It may be mentioned here that the subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution are directly linked to livelihoods.

Process Adopted for Conducting Gram Sabha Meetings

The district administration facilitated the conduct of gram sabha meetings exclusively with the electorate of the village through a process of majority vote. Panchayat-wise electoral lists were prepared. Gram sabha meetings were held exclusively with rural voters in 932 Gram Panchayats in Nellore district from 2nd January, 2014 to 8th January, 2014 for a period of seven days. Out of the 13,82,489 rural voters in the district, 1,29,895 (9.39 percent) participated in the gram sabhas. 129 common agenda items were put-forth in the discussions before the gram sabhas which were mainly related to the civic services and performance levels of officials. Adequate precautions were taken while conducting gram sabhas in view of the fault lines that exist at the village level along caste, religion, political party, income and linguistic lines. The officials took all steps to facilitate organising gram sabhas, including the wide publicity, and geared up the concerned department officials to come prepared with reports. The administration provided a standard pre-printed copy of the agenda booklet to the sarpanch who was trained in conducting the

gram sabha. The Panchayat Secretary read out the agenda on behalf of the illiterate Sarpanches.

The attendance registers based on the electoral rolls of village were pre-printed and placed at the venue of the gram sabha. All the electors signed in the register. The seats were divided into sectors and one staff was put in-charge of each sector in order to pacify aggressive voters during debates and to count the votes which are recorded through raising of hands and proceedings were recorded on video.

Agenda Items before the Gram Sabha and Steps taken for Fair Decisions

The agenda consisted of the 29 subjects under Schedule 11 of the Constitution. The identified key issues under each of the 29 subjects also figured in 129 common agenda items. These 129 items were placed for discussion before gram sabhas (932) uniformly by the district administration. The common agenda items were placed before the gram sabhas based on the earlier popular demands and grievances of the people over the delivery of government services and performance of functionaries. The votes were then counted and the majority opinion was recorded as a resolution of the gram sabha in the booklet.

The rating of powerful officials was in terms of positive statements, while the rating of other staff was obtained through negative statements. Space was provided in the booklet

against each subject for recording suo moto resolutions of the gram sabha. This step is intended to measure the negative feedback on all the services being rendered by the government such as agricultural inputs, water supply, condition of roads, timelines of pension payments and so on.

Follow-up of Gram Sabha Decisions

The respective line departments, at the end of the gram sabha meetings, collected the consolidated report on departmental services which pin-pointed the deficiencies in terms of specific villages, services and officials. Corrective action was taken at the mandal level or district level promptly, while action at State level was forwarded to the State headquarters. The compilation of suo-moto resolutions provided the basis for the annual action plan of the department in the district. The district administration developed an Information Technology (IT) application in which the Panchayat Secretaries uploaded the proceedings of the gram sabha meetings both in digital form as well as scanned copy of the filled up agenda booklet (Gram Sabha Reports of Nellore, 2013). Each item is recorded along with the number of voters who voted for it.

Outcome of the Discussions of Gram Sabhas

This section deals with the quantitative and qualitative results of the gram sabha meetings in the study district. A total of 3,458 suo moto resolutions and 2,088 suo moto proposals were made in gram sabhas, besides

the 129 common agenda items moved by the district administration. The suo moto resolutions or proposals were categorised under the two broad categories, livelihood and living conditions.

Quantitative Results

Suo Moto Resolutions of Gram Sabhas

Table 1 presents the suo moto resolutions by subject. Drinking water and sanitation occupied the top place amongst all the resolutions;

More than 20 per cent of all resolutions were on drinking water and sanitation. The second biggest concern expressed was related to internal roads (15.3 per cent) and the third was regarding land matters (12.5 per cent). Around 40 per cent of resolutions are living condition-related services provided by local governments covering drinking water, sanitation, internal roads and street lights. About one-third of the resolutions are livelihood related and cover land matters, irrigation and primary sector.

Table 1: Suo Moto Resolutions made during the Gram Sabha Meetings by Subject

	Subject	Suo-moto resolutions made	Share (%)
Living conditions related (55%)	Drinking water	626	17.0
	Internal roads	563	15.3
	Street lights and sanitation	360	9.8
	Anganwadi	188	5.1
	Others	152	4.1
	Housing	58	1.6
	Welfare	41	1.1
	Education	27	0.7
	Mines	3	0.1
	Livelihood related (45%)	Revenue	459
Irrigation		262	7.1
PDS		176	4.8
Agriculture		169	4.6
AH		154	4.2
NREGA		151	4.1
Health		108	2.9
Primary sector		79	2.1
DRDA		62	1.7
Liquor		24	0.7
	Subsidy loans	16	0.4

Note: PDS-Public Distribution System; AH-Animal Husbandry; Anganwadi-Nutrition to nursing mothers and pre-school kids; DRDA-District Rural Development Agency related issues such as pensions; NREGA-National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

Sources: Data compiled from the Gram Sabha Resolutions, District Collectorate, Nellore.

Table 1 shows the share of suo moto proposals by subject which did not obtain a majority vote and hence could not be converted as resolutions. Drinking water, internal roads, street lights, sanitation and irrigation contributed more than 50 per cent of all the proposals.

Agenda Items Placed by the District Administration

Table 2 and Table 3 show the vote share at district level and support of gram sabhas for the common agenda items moved by the district administration by subject. Of the 129 items, only very important items or which secured more than 4 per cent votes at district level are picked.

Livelihood-related Subjects

Table 2 presents the livelihood-related items. About 5 per cent of the voters said they did not receive agriculture seeds in time, banking services to farmers were poor, wage payments to National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) workers was not done in time, immunisation of cattle was not done in time, fodder was not supplied, veterinary dispensary services were unsatisfactory, government land was encroached, pattedar pass books were not issued in time. About 11 per cent of the voters said tail end lands were not receiving ample water for irrigation. About 10 per cent of panchayats said that the burial grounds were under encroachment.

Living Conditions and Welfare Subjects

Table 3 presents the response on items related to living conditions and welfare. The department with the maximum negative voting on services and functionaries was electricity company with all the items put to vote crossing 10 per cent negative vote by and large. Village infrastructure, comprising of drinking water, stormwater drainage, sewerage and internal roads, stood second in the district with the negative vote touching almost 10 per cent on all items. The three top individual needs expressed by voters were housing with latrines (16 per cent), ration cards (13 per cent) and pensions (9 per cent) in that order. Only 42.2 per cent voters said that the Panchayat was collecting taxes.

Performance of Functionaries

Table 4 presents the acceptance of the key mandal level functionaries. 51 per cent voters accepted tehsildar, 59 per cent MDO and 45 per cent station house officer. 27 mandals (59 per cent) accepted their tehsildar, 37 (80 per cent) MDO and 22 (48 per cent) accepted their station house officer out of 46 mandals in the district.

Qualitative Observations

Instances of a three select observations were recorded. During the gram sabha held in Palicherlavaripalem (V), Chillakur (M) on 2nd November, 2013, a village elder proposed an expensive irrigation work after a forceful and convincing argument. Due to reverence

Table 2: Livelihood-related Items

Subject	Common Agenda Item	Votes	Vote Share (%)	GPS (0 Votes)	GPS (<50% Votes)	GPS (>50% Votes)
AGRICULTURE	Did not receive seeds in time	6,583	5.1	613	243	35
	Banking services to farmers in the service area are not satisfactory	6,080	4.7	655	206	30
	NREGA wage payments are not made in time	7,370	5.7	538	332	26
ANIMAL HUSBANDRY	Immunisation is not being done in time	6,291	4.8	628	214	28
	Fodder seed is not supplied in time	6,532	5.0	636	208	26
	Veterinary dispensary services are unsatisfactory	5,536	4.3	700	145	25
IRRIGATION	Tail end lands are not receiving water	15,494	11.9	539	228	93
	Irrigation canal repairs are not done in time	5,169	4.0	736	98	26
REVENUE	Government land is encroached by ineligible individuals	6,000	4.6	630	237	29
	Pattedar passbooks and title deeds are not given in time	5,396	4.2	534	347	15
	Burial ground is under encroachment	5,758	4.4	711	73	37

NOTE: GP- Gram panchayat; NREGA- National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

Sources: Data compiled from the Gram Sabha resolutions, District collector's office, Nellore.

Table 3: Response on items Related to Living Conditions and Welfare

SUBJECT	AGENDA ITEM	VOTES	VOTE SHARE (%)	GPs(0 VOTES)	GPs(<50% VOTES)	GPs (>50% VOTES)
HOUSING	We need house sites	20,528	15.8	200	612	76
	We have house sites but need houses	13,499	10.4	446	372	70
DRINKING WATER AND SANITATION	We are not receiving 4 pots of water per house daily	6,628	5.1	598	250	37
	Water supplied is not fit for drinking	7,350	5.7	630	196	59
	We want sanitary latrines	15,726	12.1	419	379	87
	Rainwater is not going out of the village	10,953	8.4	515	312	58
	Drain water is not going out of the village	11,637	9.0	523	299	63
ROADS	Internal roads are bad	14,466	11.1	466	309	97
	Approach roads to village are bad (PR or R&B)	11,919	9.2	597	192	83
ELECTRICITY	Lineman is not accessible	10,898	8.4	621	183	77
	Failed transformers are not replaced in 48 hours	14,901	11.5	509	279	93
	Electric repairs are not attended promptly	13,195	10.2	553	239	89
	Damages electric poles are not restored	16,151	12.4	449	327	105
HEALTH	PHC services are bad	2,245	1.7	725	106	5

	108 ambulance is not transporting delivery cases to and fro	2,488	1.9	739	99	12
	104 vehicle services are poor	4,515	3.5	740	82	28
WELFARE	We are not receiving pensions within 5 th of every month	4,901	3.8	711	129	26
	We want pensions	11,639	9.0	257	564	45
	There are disabled individuals still to attend SADAREM camp	5,025	3.9	436	409	21
CIVIL SUPPLIES	We want deepam gas connections	14,806	11.4	360	438	69
	Gas cylinder supply is irregular	7,656	5.9	640	180	47
	Ammahastam commodities are of poor quality	17,874	13.8	457	308	110
	Ration shop dealer is not performing	3,440	2.6	745	111	19
	We want white cards	16,997	13.1	204	608	63
PANCHAYAT	Panchayat Secretary is performing well	80,439	61.9	122	78	685
	Panchayat staff are collecting taxes	54,751	42.2	304	155	426

NOTE: GP- Gram Panchayat; R&B- Roads and Buildings Department; PR- Panchayat Raj Department. SADAREM – A Special Campaign Programme to Issue Disabled Certificates.

Source: Computed Data of Gram Sabha Resolutions, District Collector's Office, Nellore.

Table 4: Acceptance of the Key Mandal Level Functionaries

OFFICIAL	ITEM	VOTES	VOTE SHARE	GPs	GP SHARE	MANDALS	MANDAL SHARE
Tehsildar	Tehsildar stood on the side of weaker sections	66,425	51%	566	61%	27	59%
MDO	MDO is implementing welfare schemes efficiently	76,183	59%	658	71%	37	80%
Station House Officer	Station house officer of police station, is registering FIR immediately upon complaint by victims, and completing the investigation promptly	58,201	45%	480	52%	22	48%

NOTE: GP-Gram Panchayat.

Source: Compiled the Data Sources from the District Panchayat Offices of the Nellore District.

to the man, the proposal was not discussed by the gram sabha. However, when it was put to vote, only one vote was polled in favour of the proposal and it was defeated. On another occasion of gram sabha held at Akkampet (v), Manubole (M) on 9th November, 2013, the vacant field assistant of NREGA position was proposed to be filled up with the candidate proposed by the sarpanch. Two other eligible candidates volunteered for the position. When the gram sabha voted for one of them, the sarpanch was seen exclaiming what was the point in being sarpanch if everything was decided by the voters. In Chittedu (V), Kota(M) on 5th November, 2013, the entire gram sabha consisting of two opposing groups voted together in resolving to close down a polluting aquaculture factory in their village after a lot of deliberation.

Summary of Results

The summary of the results reveal that the rural voters are very sincere in assessing

the delivery of State government and local body services, rating the performance of officials, and articulating their needs, both individual as well as community. It is noticed that the collective of gram sabha, even with limited participation of about 9.34 percent, is extremely powerful in suggesting sensible solutions for their problems. The gram sabhas also demolish class barriers in villages. Women from weaker sections who never sit in the presence of upper caste males sit on chairs during the sabhas. The proposals of dominant individuals are defeated when put to vote. It provides valuable insights into the delivery of services and working of grassroots functionaries.

Discussion and Key Concerns

Amongst all the services offered by the government, discontentment about electricity is the highest, followed by civic infrastructure viz., water supply, drainage and internal roads. The highest number of suo moto resolutions

are also on water supply, drainage and internal roads. Amongst the individual needs, demand for housing is highest, followed by ration cards, pensions and land matters. The negative vote on electricity is a reflection of the erratic power supply situation during the peak agricultural season in the district.

Nellore district, with a rainfall of 1080 mm and major irrigation reservoirs like Somasila, is not drought-prone unlike other districts such as Anantapur. The expression of discontentment about water supply as well as demand for sufficient quality drinking suggests that the state of rural water supply infrastructure is poor both in terms of magnitude as well as maintenance. State government bears the capital expenditure (CAPEX), creates water supply infrastructure and transfers them to local bodies for maintenance. However, in the absence of devolution of funds to local bodies, they are unable to incur the operational expenditure (OPEX) and maintain the water supply schemes.

There should be a single agency, either the panchayat or the Mandal Praja Parishad to maintain the entire water supply infrastructure in the area. All the administrative powers, staff and funds should be vested in one single agency in any area. The results of the gram sabha meetings put forth the problem of sanitation very strongly. Village sanitation involves four different systems viz., stormwater drainage system, sewerage system, pucca internal roads and a dumping yard facility for

solid waste management. Various studies have established that good water and sanitation greatly reduce the disease burden of the population. Instead of spreading the funds thin, a saturation method should be adopted for sanitation infrastructure in the village. OPEX funding should also be tied up after CAPEX is completed to prevent the assets from being defunct. The method of first granting house site pattas and later creating infrastructure should be discontinued. Civic infrastructure creation should come first and weaker section house construction should come next.

Thematic Framework of Key Concerns

- 1) Community assessment is a powerful instrument in providing quarterly feedback on the service levels and satisfaction of the services provided by various departments (Sinha, 2008). The results of this round of gram sabhas suggest that the departments of Rural Water Supply (RWS) and Panchayati Raj Engineering (PRE) need to work under one umbrella. Similarly, the Department of Civil Supplies have to ensure time-bound issue of new ration cards and gas connections, and timely delivery of gas cylinders. Agriculture department is required to re-engineer their processes for on-time delivery of quality inputs. The Panchayati Raj department should focus on property tax collection at the Panchayat level as suggested in the gram sabhas. Hindrances to timely

wage payments under NREGA should be removed. The Department of Irrigation should revise its schedule of annual maintenance of all major irrigation canals. Similarly, The Department of Revenue should set-up a mechanism for removal of encroachments and protection of valuable government land. "Major decisions such as land allotment, if discussed in gram sabhas will prevent the kind of uproar seen in Andhra Pradesh due to land allotments"(Bandyopadhyay, 2008).

- 2) Community monitoring of public officials improves their accountability (Afridi, 2008). Important functionaries at the mandal level such as tehsildars, MDOs and police station house officers, and those at the village level such as the Panchayat Secretary, Village Revenue Officer and so on should be placed directly under the gram sabha. The transfers of Tehsildar, MDO and Police Station House Officer should be based on the majority decisions of the gram sabhas in the mandal.
- 3) The concept of gram sabha is not well understood/received both by the policymakers as well as the public (Nambiar, 2001). The deliberative culture in Indian democratic process is seen to be different from that globally conceived (Kulkarni, 2012). The results of these gram sabhas reveal that if the administration

shows commitment, the citizens respond with enthusiasm and maturity.

- 4) The very strong women's Self-Help Group movement in Andhra Pradesh is confined to thrift and loans. Women's participation in the gram sabhas will further strengthen local development (Bandhyopadhyay, Yugandhar, and Mukherjee, 2002) (Gibson, 2012). Self-Help groups in any village constitute almost a third of the votes and can act as the skeletal structure for gram sabhas. Building the institution of the gram sabhas around the already-powerful Self-Help Groups will also deter political groups from making it a platform for partisan politics.

Legal and Policy Recommendations

The following measures are to strengthen the participation of direct voters in local governance:

- 1) Law enforcement functions should be divided between State government and local self government. Local self government police should be entrusted with petty offenses and traffic functions, while the State government police should handle grave offenses.
- 2) Magistracy and police are the key functions that bring autonomy to a political institution. Initially, essential functions such as water supply, sanitation, street lighting, planning, land administration, policing, education,

primary health and tax collection should be entrusted. After the local bodies gain experience in handling the powers, other functions can be devolved.

- 3) The officials of local government should be exclusive; no State government official should be appointed to posts of local body without the consent of majority of gram sabhas in the jurisdiction of local body. All officials at the grassroots level should be hired by the local government and continue to hold office at the pleasure of the gram sabhas.
- 4) The jurisdiction of the panchayat government should be increased so as to cover about 50,000 population. This is equivalent to the size of a mandal which can be designated as a gram panchayat consisting of about 40 habitations, each with its own gram sabha. The institution of mandal parishads should be abolished and the zilla parishad should have elected heads of panchayats as ex-officio members.
- 5) Required changes to AP Panchayati Raj Act should be made for conduct of gram sabhas exclusively with voters of the village as envisaged under the Constitution under the aegis of an independent body such as State Election Commission.

Conclusion

The outcome of the experiences of gram sabhas in Nellore district proves a fact that empowerment of people through effective functioning of gram sabha is possible through increasing the efficacy of local administration. Further, the commitment of district level administration is very much essential to facilitate the free and fair functioning of gram sabhas and proper action on the resolutions in order to achieve the very objective of self governance of local bodies. It may be mentioned here as per the Devolution Report (2015-2016) of Ministry of Panchayatraj, Government of India, the State of Andhra Pradesh stands at 13th rank and 10th rank in terms of aggregate indices in devolution in policy and practices, respectively in the country. Therefore, the empowerment of people through gram sabha is a myth in the absence of de jure and de facto devolution of 29 subjects under 11th Schedule as envisaged in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act to local self governance units. Thus, the policy suggestions arise from the case study of Nellore district are complementary to the main limb of devolution of functions, functionaries and finances (3Fs) to local self governance units.

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