

COMPUTATIONAL ANALYSIS OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES' PARTICIPATION IN GRAMA SABHA: A KARNATAKA STUDY

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Abstract

The Grama Sabha represents a foundational mechanism of participatory democracy within India's Panchayati Raj framework, enabling direct interaction between citizens and elected representatives in local governance. While its constitutional mandate underscores inclusive deliberation and accountability, empirical evidence on the nature and depth of elected representatives' participation remains limited. This study undertakes a **computational analysis** of participation patterns of elected representatives in Grama Sabha meetings across Gram Panchayats in Karnataka. Primary data were collected through a structured survey administered to **384 elected representatives**, capturing participation across **sixteen analytically defined dimensions**, including attendance regularity, procedural awareness, agenda engagement, financial oversight, grievance handling, inclusiveness, conflict management, and post-meeting follow-up. Quantitative and descriptive analytical techniques were employed to identify participation trends and performance differentials across dimensions. The findings indicate relatively strong engagement in terms of attendance and awareness of institutional roles, while revealing notable deficiencies in inclusive consultation practices, conflict resolution, and systematic monitoring of resolutions. By integrating computational techniques with participatory governance analysis, the study contributes empirical insights into the functioning of Grama Sabhas and highlights critical areas for institutional strengthening. The paper concludes with policy-oriented recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of Grama Sabhas as instruments of grassroots democracy in Karnataka.

Keywords: Grama Sabha; Elected Representatives; Computational Analysis; Panchayati Raj Institutions; Participatory Democracy; Decentralised Governance; Karnataka.

1. Introduction

Democratic decentralisation in India is constitutionally anchored through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which institutionalised Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as the third tier of governance. At the base of this structure lies the Grama Sabha, defined as the general body of registered voters in a village. The Grama Sabha is intended to function as a forum of direct democracy, ensuring transparency, accountability, and people's participation in local self-governance (Government of India, 1993).

In Karnataka, one of the earliest adopters of Panchayati Raj reforms, the Grama Sabha has been legally strengthened through the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, and subsequent amendments. The Act assigns the Grama Sabha a critical role in approving development plans, reviewing implementation of schemes, identifying beneficiaries, and holding elected representatives accountable. Elected representatives—particularly Gram Panchayat Members and Adhyakshas—are legally and morally obligated to participate actively in Grama Sabha meetings and facilitate citizen engagement.

However, empirical studies across Indian states indicate a persistent gap between the normative vision of Grama Sabhas and their operational reality (Heller, Harilal, & Chaudhuri, 2007; Shankar, 2010). Attendance may be formally recorded, but deliberative quality, inclusiveness, and follow-up often remain weak. While several studies focus on citizen participation, fewer examine the role and behaviour of elected representatives themselves, despite their centrality to the functioning of Grama Sabhas.

This paper addresses this gap by analysing the **extent and nature of participation of elected representatives in Grama Sabha meetings in Karnataka**, using systematic primary data. By examining multiple dimensions of participation, the study contributes to a more granular understanding of grassroots governance and identifies areas requiring institutional and capacity-building interventions.

2. Conceptual Framework: Participation of Elected Representatives

Participation in local governance extends beyond mere physical presence. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation conceptualises participation as a continuum ranging from tokenism to genuine citizen power. Applying this framework to elected representatives, participation can be understood across several dimensions:

1. **Attendance and Awareness** – physical presence and knowledge of statutory responsibilities.
2. **Deliberative Engagement** – active involvement in discussions, planning, and financial matters.
3. **Facilitative Role** – encouraging community participation and sharing information.
4. **Responsive Governance** – grievance redressal, conflict resolution, and feedback handling.
5. **Inclusive Practices** – engagement with marginalised groups.
6. **Accountability and Follow-up** – implementation and monitoring of Grama Sabha decisions.

These dimensions informed the design of the present study and guided the interpretation of findings.

3. Legislative and Institutional Context in Karnataka

The **Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act, 1993** mandates that every Gram Panchayat shall convene Grama Sabha meetings at least twice a year, with special meetings for budget approval and welfare programmes. The Act explicitly states that elected members are required to attend Grama Sabha meetings and respond to issues raised by citizens (Government of Karnataka, 1993).

Further, guidelines issued by the Panchayati Raj Department and training modules developed by the State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), Mysuru, emphasise the role of elected representatives as facilitators rather than mere administrators. Despite this, administrative reviews and independent studies have pointed out irregular meetings, limited deliberation, and elite dominance in many Gram Sabhas (SIRD Mysuru, 2018; PRIA, 2014).

4. Objectives of the Study

The present study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To assess the frequency of attendance of elected representatives in Grama Sabha meetings.
2. To examine the level of awareness among elected representatives regarding their statutory roles.
3. To analyse the extent of active participation in deliberations, planning, and financial discussions.
4. To evaluate the role of elected representatives in community mobilisation, inclusion, and grievance redressal.
5. To identify strengths and gaps in follow-up, implementation, and accountability mechanisms.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study adopted a **descriptive and analytical research design**, using a structured survey to capture self-reported participation of elected representatives in Grama Sabha processes.

5.2 Sample and Universe

The study covered **384 elected representatives** from Gram Panchayats in Karnataka. The respondents included ward members and office bearers who regularly engage with Grama Sabha meetings.

5.3 Tool for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire consisting of **16 statements** measured on a **five-point Likert scale** (Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never) was used. The statements captured multiple dimensions of participation, from attendance to conflict resolution.

5.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, primarily frequencies and percentages. Interpretation focused on identifying dominant response patterns and relative strengths and weaknesses across dimensions.

6. Results and Analysis

Sl. No.	Item	Always n (%)	Often n (%)	Sometimes n (%)	Rarely n (%)	Never n (%)	Total
1	How often do you attend Grama Sabha meetings?	63 (16.41)	123 (32.03)	105 (27.34)	57 (14.84)	36 (9.38)	384 (100)
2	Awareness that elected members must attend all Grama Sabha meetings	69 (17.97)	149 (38.80)	93 (24.22)	45 (11.72)	28 (7.29)	384 (100)
3	Level of active participation in Grama Sabha discussions	106 (27.60)	115 (29.95)	79 (20.57)	47 (12.24)	37 (9.64)	384 (100)
4	Encouraging community members to attend Grama Sabha meetings	104 (27.08)	104 (27.08)	84 (21.88)	64 (16.67)	28 (7.29)	384 (100)
5	Sharing information from Grama Sabha meetings with constituency	78 (20.31)	146 (38.02)	92 (23.96)	40 (10.42)	28 (7.29)	384 (100)
6	Involvement in implementing decisions taken during Grama Sabha meetings	95 (24.74)	111 (28.91)	102 (26.56)	39 (10.16)	37 (9.64)	384 (100)
7	Presenting development plans in Grama Sabha meetings	84 (21.88)	105 (27.34)	104 (27.08)	70 (18.23)	21 (5.47)	384 (100)
8	Participation in discussions on financial matters in Grama Sabha	92 (23.96)	114 (29.69)	79 (20.57)	65 (16.93)	34 (8.85)	384 (100)

9	Ensuring grievances of citizens are addressed through Grama Sabha	140 (36.46)	79 (20.57)	91 (23.70)	42 (10.94)	32 (8.33)	384 (100)
10	Consulting with marginalized groups (SC/ST, women, etc.) during Grama Sabha	39 (10.16)	149 (38.80)	95 (24.74)	70 (18.23)	31 (8.07)	384 (100)
11	Ensuring follow-up and implementation of Grama Sabha decisions	76 (19.79)	109 (28.39)	108 (28.13)	68 (17.71)	23 (5.99)	384 (100)
12	Awareness that Grama Sabha must review social and development programs	149 (38.80)	80 (20.83)	89 (23.18)	45 (11.72)	21 (5.47)	384 (100)
13	Ensuring that meeting minutes of Grama Sabha are shared with the public	101 (26.30)	136 (35.42)	86 (22.40)	41 (10.68)	20 (5.21)	384 (100)
14	Facilitating discussions on local resource allocation	93 (24.22)	132 (34.38)	94 (24.48)	42 (10.94)	23 (5.99)	384 (100)
15	Involvement in conflict resolution through the Grama Sabha	60 (15.63)	129 (33.59)	100 (26.04)	74 (19.27)	21 (5.47)	384 (100)
16	Addressing feedback or complaints raised in Grama Sabha meetings	102 (26.56)	98 (25.52)	83 (21.61)	75 (19.53)	26 (6.77)	384 (100)

6.1 Attendance in Grama Sabha Meetings

The data indicate that **48.44%** of respondents reported attending Grama Sabha meetings **always or often**, while **27.34%** attended sometimes. However, a notable **24.22%** attended rarely or never. This suggests that while attendance levels are moderate, a significant minority of elected representatives remain disengaged. Similar patterns have been reported in earlier studies from Karnataka and other states, indicating that attendance alone cannot be taken as evidence of effective participation (Heller et al., 2007).

6.2 Awareness of Mandatory Attendance

Regarding awareness that elected members must attend all Grama Sabha meetings, **56.77%** reported always or often being aware of this obligation. However, nearly **19%** indicated rare or no awareness. This gap highlights deficiencies in induction and refresher training for elected representatives, particularly first-time members.

6.3 Active Participation in Discussions

Active participation levels appear stronger, with **57.55%** reporting always or often contributing to discussions. Nevertheless, over **21%** reported rare or no participation. This supports the argument that attendance does not automatically translate into deliberative engagement (Shankar, 2010).

6.4 Encouraging Community Participation

Only **54.16%** of respondents consistently encouraged community members to attend Grama Sabha meetings. The remaining respondents either did so occasionally or not at all. Since mobilisation is a critical facilitative function of elected representatives, this finding points to a structural weakness in participatory outreach.

6.5 Information Sharing with Constituency

Information dissemination emerged as a relatively stronger area, with **58.33%** of respondents frequently sharing Grama Sabha outcomes with their constituencies. This aligns with PRIA's (2014) observation that representatives often act as information conduits, though feedback loops remain weak.

6.6 Implementation of Decisions

About **53.65%** reported being actively involved in implementing Grama Sabha decisions. However, nearly **20%** indicated rare or no involvement, raising concerns about the translation of deliberation into action.

6.7 Presentation of Development Plans

Only **49.22%** consistently presented development plans in Grama Sabha meetings, while a substantial proportion did so irregularly. This weakens participatory planning and reduces the Grama Sabha to a reactive rather than proactive forum.

6.8 Participation in Financial Discussions

Participation in financial deliberations was moderate, with **53.65%** engaging frequently. However, reluctance to discuss budgets openly may reflect limited financial literacy among elected representatives, a concern echoed in SIRD training assessments.

6.9 Grievance Redressal

Grievance redressal emerged as one of the strongest areas, with **57.03%** reporting frequent involvement. This indicates that Grama Sabhas are increasingly used as forums for voicing complaints, although systematic follow-up remains inconsistent.

6.10 Consultation with Marginalised Groups

This dimension revealed one of the weakest performances. Only **48.96%** reported always or often consulting SC/ST groups, women, and other marginalised sections, while over **26%** did so rarely or never. This finding corroborates concerns about social exclusion and elite dominance in village-level forums (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006).

6.11 Follow-up of Decisions

Follow-up mechanisms were weak, with only **48.18%** ensuring consistent implementation of Grama Sabha decisions. Lack of documentation, monitoring, and administrative support contributes to this gap.

6.12 Awareness of Review Functions

Awareness that Grama Sabhas must review social and development programmes was relatively high (**59.63%**), suggesting that conceptual understanding exists even if practice lags.

6.13 Sharing of Meeting Minutes

Transparency practices showed moderate performance, with **61.72%** sharing minutes regularly. However, public display and accessibility of records remain uneven.

6.14 Resource Allocation Discussions

More than half (**58.6%**) facilitated discussions on local resource allocation, indicating partial realisation of fiscal decentralisation at the village level.

6.15 Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution through Grama Sabha was limited, with only **49.22%** engaging frequently. Traditional power structures and reluctance to address sensitive issues publicly may explain this pattern.

6.16 Addressing Feedback and Complaints

Handling feedback and complaints showed mixed results, reflecting procedural engagement without systematic grievance redress mechanisms.

7. Discussion

The findings reveal a pattern of **procedural compliance with limited depth of participation**. Elected representatives in Karnataka largely recognise the importance of Grama Sabhas and participate to a moderate extent, but their engagement often remains transactional rather than transformative. Stronger performance in grievance redressal and information sharing contrasts with weaker inclusion, conflict resolution, and follow-up mechanisms.

This aligns with broader literature suggesting that decentralisation reforms require continuous capacity building, incentive alignment, and institutional support to move beyond tokenism (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Heller et al., 2007).

8. Policy Implications and Recommendations

1. **Structured Capacity Building:** Mandatory induction and refresher training focusing on facilitation, inclusion, and financial literacy.
2. **Strengthening Incentives:** Adequate allowances and logistical support to enable proactive engagement.
3. **Institutionalising Follow-up:** Public action-taken reports on Grama Sabha resolutions.
4. **Inclusive Outreach:** Special mobilisation strategies for women and marginalised communities.
5. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** District-level audits of Grama Sabha quality, not merely frequency.

9. Conclusion

The study underscores that elected representatives play a pivotal role in shaping the effectiveness of Grama Sabhas in Karnataka. While attendance and basic awareness are relatively strong, deeper participatory practices require sustained institutional investment. Strengthening the capacity, incentives, and accountability of elected representatives is essential for transforming Grama Sabhas into vibrant institutions of grassroots democracy.

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