

Impact of Special Grama Sabhas for the Physically Handicapped People and School Children on the Reduction of Socio Economic Exclusion: Case Study of a Village Panchayath in Kerala

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The introduction of decentralized planning in Kerala in the year 1996, heralded a new era of participatory pattern of development in the state. Each and every stage of development planning in the state is based on the active involvement of people. People's participation had been ensured by the various institutions like, Grama Sabha, Development Seminars Beneficiary Committees, Expert groups, monitoring committees etc. Of all these various realms of People's participation, the institution of Grama Sabha is the most important one. From 9th plan onwards, Grama Sabhas are very active in Kerala. The experience from conducting general Grama Sabha's showed that, the participation of physically and mentally differently abled people are chronically absent in such meetings. The conspicuous absence of these groups had led to one or another form of social exclusion. In order to overcome this problem, from this year (2012) onwards, the Government of Kerala had insisted that, all the local bodies should conduct special Grama Sabhas, for the old, differently abled, and school children. Hence, the present study has been done, with the following objectives:

- a) To study the need for special Grama Sabha meetings of physically handicapped people
- b) To investigate the effectiveness of special Grama Sabhas for school children
- c) To examine the various income generating projects proposed in the special Grama Sabha.
- d) To examine the challenges and opportunity for special Grama Sabha.

The paper is divided in to three sections. The first section deals with, back ground of participatory pattern of development planning process in Kerala, and a brief discussion of the various institutions which enables

mass participation. The second section presents a brief discussion of the institution of Grama Sabha and the need for special Grama Sabha. The third section presents the actual experience of a village panchayat in convening two special Grama Sabhas. The importance of the special Grama Sabhas, on the participants and the challenges and opportunities are also discussed here.

Section - I

Background of Participative Pattern of Development Planning in Kerala.

People's participation was initiated in Kerala's development planning process, in the year 1996. One of the strong pillars of people's planning (decentralized planning) in Kerala is the assurance of mass participation in the development activities of the state (Parameswaran 1999). Following the guidelines of the Sen Committee Report, Kerala State Planning Board finalized the introduction of decentralized planning in Kerala. The Chairman of the committee, S.B.Sen, believed that; the true spirit of democracy lies in the participation of people in the functioning of the state, ranging from the very inception of ideas to the final stage of project implementation and evaluation.

People's participation is a process by which, people, especially the disadvantaged people, influence the decisions that affect them (Bhavan Bhatnagar 1992). The relevance of people's participation in Kerala's development back ground should be approached from this angle. This position has been further classified by Norman Uphoff (1992); by stating that, participation can be regarded both as a means and as an end. When people take responsibility for their own development, it can be considered as a better way to

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achieve improvement in economic and social conditions. In the words of Issac Thomas (1997) the people's campaign for IXth plan represented an initiative to make use of the legacy of collective social intervention and strength of mass movement to meet the contemporary crisis of development. The participation of people was highly encouraging during the IXth plan period. The dimension of the active involvement of common people, was in fact unbelievable to many foreign scholars. As a result, Richard Franke and Barbara H Chasin (1997) wrote that "Kerala's decentralized programmes is probably the largest of its kind in the world at present". Three million people, 10% of the states population took part in the Grama Sabhas, that aired complaints and identified major problems in their villages and urban neighborhoods in the months of September and October 1996. As described in the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act 1992, Grama Sabha means a body consisting of all persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village, comprised within the area of a panchayat. Thus all the voters in every ward of a panchayat are eligible members of Grama Sabhas.

The Kerala Panchayat Raj Amendment Act 1999 (Act 13) describes the functions of Grama Sabhas as follows:

- ❖ Assist the panchayat in collecting valuable data and information which are essential for the preparation of development plans.
- ❖ Suggest the priorities for the preparation and implementation of development projects which are to be implemented in the panchayat.
- ❖ Selection and ranking of beneficiaries for various beneficiary schemes.
- ❖ Extend all sorts of help to the panchayat in the implementation of various development projects and
- ❖ Provide necessary assistance to the effective implementation of projects in the form of voluntary service, money and material.

As per the new Amendment Act (1999) Grama Sabha meetings should be convened once in every three months in a year, and the Quorum for the meeting is 10% of the total number of voters in the concerned ward of the panchayat.

The 12th Plan of Kerala had launched a new variety of Grama Sabhas called special Grama Sabhas. These meetings are particularly meant for those people who always fail or at least hesitate to attend common, Grama Sabha meetings. This group includes, very old people, physically and mentally differently abled people and school students. It shows the intense desire of the Government to enhance social justice to all the people, including the traditionally marginalized people. In other words, social exclusion and marginalization of the old, differently abled people, and children will be eliminated by the end of 12th plan; i.e. 2017). For this purpose, it is mandatory that; all the local bodies must allot at least 5% of the general plan fund. If it is found necessary, local bodies are allowed to raise this share to any level. All these factors indicate the new initiatives undertaken by the state, to reduce or eliminate social exclusion of physically and economically weak people.

Section III

Experience of a Village Panchayat in Kerala in Reducing Social Exclusion through Special Grama Sabha Meetings

In this section an attempt is made to examine the impact of special Grama Sabhas on the reduction of social exclusion of marginalized people in Vellangalloor panchayat, which belongs to Mukundapuram Taluk of Thrissur District, Kerala State. It is a panchayat having 21 wards/. The geographical area of Vellangallur panchayat is 26.61 Sq.kms. The total population of the panchayat is 35454, comprising of 16724 men and 18730 women. The main activity of people is agriculture and allied works.

Special Grama Sabha

In response to the directives issued by the government of Kerala, Vellangalloor panchayat had convened two special Grama Sabhas, one for the old and differently abled people (on 23rd July 2012) and another for school children (on 22nd July 2012).

Special Grama Sabhas for the Old and Physically and Mentally Challenged People.

The special Grama Sabha convened by Vellangallur panchayat authorities on 23rd July 2012 was the

beginning of a new vision of rural development. It gave a rare opportunity for all the participants to air their grievance, before a responsible public body. When the suppressed agonies of the old and disabled people broke out, it was very difficult for the organisers to hide their tears. The result of the meeting was an ardent desire to solve all the chronic problems of the participants. It took the form of various development projects, particularly for the rehabilitation of the socially excluded and marginalized people of Vellangalloor panchayat.

The special Grama Sabha was attended by 93 people; which comprised of 51 females and 42 males. The classification of the participants on the basis of their age is given below in Table 1

Table 1 : Age wise classification of the participants of Special Grama Sabha (23rd July 2012)

Age Group	Male (Number)	Female (Number)	Total (Number)
20-30	11	7	18
31-40	8	12	20
41-50	13	17	30
51-60	8	12	20
61-70	2	3	5
70+	0	0	0
Total	42	51	93

Source : Official documents of Vellangalloor panchayat (2012)

The vast majority of the participants of special Grama Sabha, belongs to the age group of 31 to 60. Nearly 70 people, fall in this age group. Within this category, the largest share, 30 people, fall in the age groups of 41-50 years. Nobody, above the age of 70, participated in the special Grama Sabha. It is clear that the majority of participants belongs to the productive age group. Even though they are productive, and capable of earning their own livelihoods, they are destined to remain as dependants; for one or another reason.

The nature of the physical disability of the participants of special Grama Sabha, reveals, another sad side of their lives. Table 2 illustrate this issue.

Table 2 : Nature of physical disability of the participants of special Grama Sabha

Type of Disability	Male (Number)	Female (Number)	Total (Number)
M.R.	12	15	27
P + 1	16	24	30
Blind	4	4	8
Deaf & Dumb	5	7	12
C.P.	5	1	6
Total	42	51	93

Source : Official documents of Vellangalloor panchayat (2012)

The type of projects, which the panchayat authorities can design for the rehabilitation of the weak and disabled depends upon the nature of their problems. The same project cannot be recommended for all the participants. The various types of disabilities of the participants include, M.R., (mentally retarded) P.H. (physically handicapped) Blind, Deaf and Dumb and C.P. (cerebral palsy) Among them, the largest number belonged to the category of P H (30) followed by M.R. (27). Whereas Blind and C.P. patients were comparatively less, 8 and 6 respectively.

Whether, they are, physically fit or not, the intense desire to have a family life, led many of the participants to enter to wed lock. The mutual support of the husband and wife, helped many people to overcome their physical weaknesses. But in the case of several others family life, was a impossible. Table 3 presents the marital status of all the participants of special Grama Sabha.

Table 3 : Marital status of the participants of special Grama Sabha

Nature of Disability	Male (No.)	Female (No.)	Total (No.)	Male (No.)	Female (No.)	Total (No.)
M.R.	0	0	0	12	15	27
P H	8	11	19	8	13	21
Blind	2	1	3	2	3	5
Deaf & Dumb	1	2	3	4	5	9
C.P.	0	0	0	5	1	6
Total	11	14	25	31	27	68

Source : Official documents of Vellangallur village panchayat (2012)

Table (3) : Shows that, it is evident from the above only 25 participants was lucky enough to have a family life, while the vast majority, 68, did not get that opportunity. All the M.R., C.P. were deprived of having family life. It is because of the nature of their physical disability. People with comparatively minor physical disabilities were successful in building up their 19 have their own familiar. Even Blind and Deaf and Dumb people could find their life partners to build up their familiar. Out of the 8 blind and 12 Deaf and Dumb people 3 each are married. All of them are manual to normal people from poor families are married. But at the same time, out of the 93 participates, 68 people are depending upon others, particularly their aged parents, brothers and sisters and close relatives for their survival. The burden of dependency inflicted upon them by fate, is a very painful problem.

The capacity of a person to build up a carrier or to choose a profession depends upon his educational qualifications. People with good educational qualifications are entitled to get good placements, the job reservation policy of the government, and the discretionary policy of commercial banks to lend special loans to these categories of people are very much helpful in this direction.

The Educational back ground of the participants of the special Gramasabha meeting can be observed from Table 4 given below.

Table 4 : Educational Status of the participants of special Grama Sabha

Educational Status	Male (No.)	Female (No.)	Total (No.)
Illiterate	12	10	22
Special School	6	15	21
L.P.School	2	3	5
U.P.School	5	4	9
High School	9	11	20
Higher Secondary	2	4	6
ITI Diploma	2	2	4
Professional Education	2	0	2
Degree	2	2	4
Total	42	51	93

Source: Official Documents of Vellangallur Village Panchayat (2012)

It is evident from the above table (4) that ; out of the 93 participants, 22 were illiterate, and about 21 received education from special schools. Another notable features is that, 20 participants have High School education and 6 are holding Higher Secondary School Certificates.

Another feature of the participants of special Grama is that, out of the 93 participants only 9 had attended General Grama Sabhas previously. It means that, for the 84 participants, special Grama Sabha was a new experience.

The economic background of the participants is a true reflection of the real degree of dependency and socio economic exclusion of suffered by the differently abled people. The agony of social exclusion and excessive dependency on the other earning members of the family, are two important issues faced by these people. Out of the 93 participants 74 did not have any source of income at all and only 3 people have monthly incomes between Rs.2000 and 3000. The table (5) given below indicates the levels of monthly incomes earned by the participants.

Table 5 : Monthly incomes of the participants of special Grama Sabha

Amount of Income per month (Rs)	Male (No.)	Female (No.)	Total (No.)
Nil	33	41	74
Less than 1000	5	6	11
1000-2000	3	2	5
2000-3000	1	2	3
3000 +	0	0	0
Total	42	51	93

Source: Official Documents of Vellangallur Village Panchayat (2012)

It is evident from the above table (5) that, the economic condition of the vast majority of participants are very pathetic. Immediate action from the authorities is required to solve the problems of these people. In order to overcome these tragic situations, they proposed several programmes. The variety of suggestions and requests made by the participants are presented in Table 6 given below.

Table 6 : Types of services and Income Generating Projects demanded by the participants

Types of demands	Male (No.)	Female (No.)	Total (No.)
Employment	22	18	40
House	20	22	42
Latrine	5	2	7
Electricity connection	10	4	14
Medicine	35	40	75
Financial Assistance	41	50	91
Pension	50	43	93
Free Bus pass	10	15	25
Speech Therapy School	1	0	1
Vegetable Shop	10	3	13
House visit of Bed ridden patients	1	0	1
Three wheeler vehicle	1	0	1

Source : Official Documents of Vellangallur Village Panchayat

The list of demands of the participants, described here, depicts the genuine desires of the disabled people . Almost all of them (91) demanded financial assistance from the government to reduce their dependence on others for their survival. Another very important item is medicine. The high cost of purchase of Medicines, compelled them to live without proper treatment. The high level of morbidity rate among there people is another reflection of this problem. Other important demands include, houses, Pensions and free buspass for travel. Vegetable shop and three wheelers for finding self employment activities etc. But, the lone voice of another participant attracted the attention of all. He demanded that, all the bed ridden patients should be visited and consoled, regularly by at least the elected members and social workers. It resembled the extreme form of social exclusion.

The main income generating projects offered by the panchayath include, special assistance for the purchase of three wheeler (for the sale of lottery ticket) and incentives to open vegetable shop.

Challenges and opportunities

The special Grama sabhas are not devoid of troubles and challenges. The most important challenges are

briefly discussed here.

- (a) It is very difficult to convince the physically challenged people that, special gramas are beneficial for them.
- (b) Transportation facility for such people to the venue of Grama Sabha is another issue. The scattered settlements of there people, in various parts of the panchayat, the main issue.
- (c) Lack of support of the family members to take these people to the venue of Gramasabha is another problem. They are highly hesitant to do so. But because of the compulsions of the elected representatives and other panchayat officials, many people cooperated with the new programme by bringing their disabled brethren to the venue.

The final out come of the special Grama Sabha was highly encouraging and positive. It provided an opportunity for the social gathering of the similarly situated personal. All the participants left the venue with the strong belief that; their problems would be resolved soon.

They unanimously opined that the meeting provided an opportunity to understand the real nature of the problems of differently abled person. It thus enabled the village panchayats to prepare, various income generating and social security programmes for the welfare of there pro proper.

The panchayat authorities, assured them that, all their demands would be met with immediately. Hence, the 12th plan of vellangallur panchayath has been prepared accordingly so that, social and economic exclusion of the differently abled would be reduced to the maximum possible extend.

Special Grama Sabha for School Students

Another notable achievement of Vellangallur Panchayat is the special Gramasabha for school children, which was convened on 22nd July 2012. The ultimate aim of students Grama Sabha is to inculcate civic consciousness among students. It also aims to encourage students to understand the meaning and functioning of Grama Sabha meetings. When the students become aware of the importance of GramaSabha they are expected to compel their parents to attend usual Grama Sabha meetings. In this regard, the performance of Vellangallur Panchayat is highly

appreciable. It is one of the first, few panchayats in Kerala to convene students special Grama Sabha.

The special Grama Sabha for School children, convened on 22nd July, was attended by 107 students (53 boys and 54 girls) from, all the wards of the panchayat. Infact, the panchayat authorities expected 10 students each from all the 21 wards. But, due to various reasons. Several students could not turn up for the meeting. Studnets from 6th to 9th standards were expected participate in the meeting.

The details regarding the number of schools in Vellangallur Panchayat are given below in Table 7

Table 7 : List of Government, Aided and unaided Schools in Vellangallur Panchayat

Schools	Number
Government High School	1
Government U.P.School	4
Government L.P.School	4
Aided L.P.School	1
Un Aided High School	2

Source : Official Documents of Vellangallur Village Panchayat.

All the students were unanimous to report that, the special Grama Sabha was a unique experience. The discussions were led by four experts.

They taught the students regarding the importance of responsible citizen shop.

The story of Meenu, the model student, told by one retired teacher, left lasting impressions in the minds of all the participants. Meenu helps her parents in the home by assisting them in all the household activities, studies well, involves in all the social issues arising in her neighbourhood, and obeyed her parents and teachers. Hence, all the children are induced to emulate the life style of Meenu.

Another important feature, though not positive of the special Grama Sabha for students at Vellangallur Panchayat was that, none of them asked any questions. They also did to suggest any project proposals. But in several other special Grama Sabhas for children in Kerala. Students came foreward with new project proposals. Fore eg: in Vithura Panchayat, of

Thiruvananthapuram District, students suggested the formulation of an army of students against drugs. They suggested that, this army should be composed of police force, civilians, teachers and students. (Thomas 2012)

The panchayat authorities had offered a free pleasure trip for all the students. Who attend, five special Grama Sabhas. This is an added incentive for them to participate in special Grama Sabha meetings. All the students who took part in the Grama Sabha revealed that, they insisted their parents, not to skip the coming general Grama Sabha meetings. This is also another positive result of the special Grama Sabha.

Major Findings

The important findings of the present study can be summed up as follows:

- ❖ Special Grama Sabha for the old and differently abled people was an eye opener to all the officials and elected representatives.
- ❖ It provided a forum for the socially and economically deprived people, (due to old age and physical disability) to assemble together and share their anxieties and agonies.
- ❖ The suggestions made by the participants were well received by the authorities.
- ❖ The 12th five year plan of Vellangallur panchayat lays special emphasis for resolving the problems of the old and differentlyabled people.
- ❖ The participants are also very happy because, it provided a forum for their socialization; and reduction in level of social exclusion.
- ❖ It enhanced the confidence level of the participants.
- ❖ Special Grama Sabha for students also was a very successful event
- ❖ All the participants were highly induced attend, further special Grama Sabha.
- ❖ It also helped to enhance their civil consciousness.
- ❖ The students special Grama Sabha could inculcate a sense of responsibility among them;

To conclude the special Grama Sabhas, organized by Vellangallur Grama Panchayat, was highly instrumental in enhancing self dignity and self confidence of the participants. It could sow the seeds of hope in their

minds. The special Grama Sabha, provided a forum for all the disabled people to present and share their grievances, before the responsible authorities. Moreover, the students, special Grama Sabha, also, was a success in inculcating a sense of civic consciousness and responsibility among studies. In short, special Grama Sabhas of Vellangallur panchayat were highly instrumental in reducing socio economic deprivation, and exclusion of a large number of old and physically disabled persons.

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