



WORKING PAPER 103

WORKING OF GRAM
SABHAS IN ANDHRA
PRADESH: PROBLEMS
AND PROSPECTS

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WORKING OF GRAM SABHAS IN ANDHRA PRADESH: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS^a

M. Devendra Babu^b

Abstract

The Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act, 1994 has made a provision for constituting a Gram Sabha (GS) for every village. This forum enables the people to participate in all aspects of village development. A recent study of the working of GSs in AP State reveals that the GS has become defunct and ineffective. A large number of factors have contributed to this situation. Functioning of rural local bodies will not be effective, transparent and accountable unless the GSs are made vibrant and regular in their meetings. This demands strong commitment and concerted efforts on the part of the state to set right the impediments in the system.

The State

Andhra Pradesh (AP) is one of the largest States in India. It ranks fifth among the States in terms of area and population. Geographically the State is divided into three regions - the Coastal, Rayalaseema and Telengana. Of the three, the first one is relatively developed whereas the other two are rainfed and backward. The rural population accounts for 73 per cent of the state's population as per the 1991 census. The State's literacy rate is 44.09 per cent compared to 51.63 per cent at the all India level (1991 census). In respect of most of the indicators of human development, such as birth and death rates, infant mortality, female life expectancy, female literacy rate and enrolment ratio in elementary schools, the State is placed above the national average but below that of its neighbouring States of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Ministry of Finance, 2001: 5-116). The State is endowed with rich natural resources like water, minerals and forest. AP is the second richest State in India (the first being undivided Bihar) relating to mineral deposits. About 23 per cent of the total geographical area is covered by forest. Further, the State has the longest coastal line of 950 kms in the country. The predominant occupation of the State is agriculture and

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nearly one-third of the State income originates from this sector. The cultivators and agricultural labourers together constitute 68.6 per cent of the main workers. With regard to the incidence of poverty, AP is relatively better placed compared to the all India level and its neighbouring States. However, the per capita income (PCI) of the State is lower than some of its neighbouring States and also lower than the all India level. For instance, the PCI of the State during 1994-95 (at current prices) was Rs.7,155 compared to Rs.8082 in Karnataka, Rs.8941 in Tamil Nadu and Rs.8,399 at the All India level (Economic Intelligence Services, 1997: 24). Thus, the State, on the one hand, is endowed with rich natural resources and, on the other, it has remained an average/middle category State in India. With a view to enhancing the pace of rural development, the State has been pursuing the policy of decentralisation since independence, sometimes bringing changes in the composition and structure of panchayat raj institutions.

Decentralisation Efforts in AP

The origin of panchayat (village local body) system in AP State, as elsewhere in India, dates back to ancient times. However, its real emergence and growth gained momentum with the passing of local self-government legislations by the British as well as the princely governments. In the post independence period, the experiment of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) as 'self-governments' in rural India (including AP) failed due to various factors to take a strong foothold. However, AP was in the forefront whenever fresh efforts were made to revive the system in the country. Right from the inception of panchayat raj in 1959, the State has been adopting the three-tier PRI structure. Gram Sabha - the people's assembly was incorporated into the structure as far back as 1959 itself (Government Press, 1988: 12). During the same period, seats were reserved for vulnerable sections such as women, and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs/ STs) (Government Press, 1988: 13-4). These radical developments in the history of PRIs in the State are a testimony the fact that the State was in favour of decentralising powers and functions down to village level and, secondly, of bringing the vulnerable sections of society into decision-making and planning process at the local level.

The State had enacted a new Panchayat Raj (PR) Act in the year 1994 in the light of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Consequently, three-tier PRIs were established in the year 1995. The Act provides for reservation of seats and authority positions for SCs/ STs, backward classes and for women. Again, the Act mentions two schedules which contain functions: the first one with 29 and the second with four broad sectors, to be performed by the three levels of panchayats (Legislative Assembly Press, 1994: 218-222). However, in reality, majority

of these functions lie outside the purview of PRIs. Presently, the PRIs have been entrusted only with very few functions. The main sectoral functions are still under the control of line departments and the overall supervising power over this rests with the District Collector.

The PR Act has made a provision for constituting a Gram Sabha (GS) for every village, which should meet twice a year. Further, each GS shall consist of all persons whose names are included in the electoral rolls for the respective GP. The Sarpanch (President) of the GP and in his absence, the Upa-Sarpanch (Vice President) is to preside over the GS meetings. A good number of functions have been entrusted to the GS, such as review of annual statement of accounts and audit report; report on the administrative affairs of the preceding year; review of works for the current year; proposals for fresh taxation or enhancement of rates of existing taxes and selection of schemes, beneficiaries and location under various anti-poverty programmes (Legislative Assembly Press, 1994: 14-15). Thus, the GS is expected to play an important role in shaping not only the panchayat administration but also the development of individuals and the community.

Objective of the Study

This paper makes an attempt to sketch the importance of GS, its working in the State of AP, extent of public participation, the problems encountered, and the remedial measures needed to make them more effective. This paper is based on a larger study undertaken during 1996-98 at ISEC, Bangalore (Aziz, et. al., 2002). The methodology adopted is descriptive and analytical. The analysis made is based on both quantitative and qualitative information. The quantitative information consists of primary and secondary information. The former was gathered from a sample of 300 citizens in the selected six GPs in Kurnool district of the State and the latter from the offices of panchayats concerned and various departments. The study is supplemented to a large extent by qualitative information, captured through field observations and discussions with the functionaries of panchayats and the public in the study area (for details of sampling method see, Aziz, et.al. 2002: 18-20).

Role of Gram Sabha

Gram Sabha is an institutional space created within the local government for structured interactions between the public and the policy makers. The broad intention of having such an institution 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 GS meetings at the

grassroots (village) level first of all facilitate participatory governance and planning since the elected representatives, officials and the citizens are expected to participate in it. This platform enables the GP to plan and implement the local development projects according to the needs and aspirations of the people. The participation of people, further, ensures cost effective planning and implementation and efficiency in monitoring of the projects. It also enables the local government to rope in the services of people's and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in their developmental efforts. The GS also ensures transparency in the administration and accountability of panchayat functionaries to the people.

The PRIs are expected to play a special role in the upliftment of women and other marginalised sections of the society. It is the duty of the GPs to recognise their problems and respond with a positive plan of action. The important areas which directly concern these people are: safe drinking water; girl education; basic health services; toilets and sanitation; anganwadis; widows and destitute women, housing, training needs in income generating schemes, assistance to form self help groups and mahila mandals and ensuring benefits under various poverty alleviation programmes. These can be identified and distributed properly among the deserved if the GSs are held with the intended spirit. Further, to secure the above needs, participation of weaker sections in GSs is most essential. Before attending the GSs, they should have a fair amount of knowledge of their demands and requirements and should be able to articulate the same in the meetings. Thus, in a nutshell, GSs pave the way for people - centered development.

Field Reality

Contrary to the above, the field reality all over India is different. Generally, the functionaries are reluctant to hold GSs as per the requirement. Citizens attendance in such meetings is very thin and a quorum is seldom achieved. If at all they are held, the meetings are for namesake. Deliberations and outcomes from such meetings leave much to be desired (Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation, 1963; Maddic, 1970; Bhargava and Raphael, 1994; Jain, 1997). However, a few States are exceptions to this. For instance, GSs are held quite regularly in the States of Kerala, West Bengal and to some extent in Karnataka. Public participation in them is also quite good. In the former two States they went a step further to hold GSs ward-wise (member constituency)/neighbourhood-wise (Sebastin, 2000: 1; Jagajeevan and Ramakantan, 2000; Muraleedharan, 2000: 344-45; Webster, 1992: 154). In Karnataka GSs were held regularly in the initial years of 1987-92 period (Aziz, 1994: 56). In the second tenure of PRIs in Karnataka, GSs were held at least at the GP headquarters if not in every revenue village.

On an average, one GS meeting was held each year (Aziz, et. al 1999; Bhargava and Raphael, 1994: 152-6).

The situation in AP State is quite the opposite due to the type of socio-economic - politico system prevailing. The first and foremost problem is that GSs are rarely convened by the GPs in the State. Secondly, wherever meetings are convened, attendance of the people was negligible and, in particular, women did not participate in GS meetings. The field information clearly vouched for this situation. It can be seen from Table-1 that out of six GPs, only one GP had conducted three GSs since 1995. As per the provisions of the Act, they should have conducted at least five meetings during the three-year period. Further, attendance of the citizens in the first two GSs was only 20 and 18 respectively. The discussions, by and large, were confined to providing

Table 1: Details of Gram Sabha Meetings Held In The Selected GPs In Kurnool District

Gram Panchayat*	Date of Gram Sabha Meeting	No. of Persons attended			Subject/Agenda of the Gram Sabha meeting
		Public	Panchayat Members	Total	
GP - A	24.4.96	20	10	30	Roads & Drainage
	18.10.96	18	10	28	Roads & Stone slabs laying
	22.5.97	+	+	+	Roads/ Stone slabs laying of/ street light
+ no note on discussions and resolutions passed and no single signature appended under the minutes of the meeting					
GP - B	No records were available about GS meetings in the GP office. It was said that the proceedings book has been kept at the Sarpanch's house. However, GP meetings proceedings book was kept in the GP office				
GP - C	the Gram Sabha meetings proceedings book was not kept in the Mandal Office. The official informed that from 1996 to 97 six GS meetings were held and only 2 were exclusively for JRY works. It was also said that 50 to 60 people had attended the meetings. Contrary to this, the proceedings book concerning the GP meetings was kept in the Mandal Office				
GP - D		same as above			
GP - E		Information not furnished			
GP - F		Information not furnished			

Note: * names of GPs kept anonymous for various reasons

Source: Offices of the respective GPs

roads, drainage and streetlights. The schemes/projects relating to women, SCs/STs and other development sectors found no place in those meetings. Due to lukewarm public response to GSs, the State government had issued an Order stipulating that at least one-third of the village population or a minimum of 50 persons should attend a GS meeting. This shows that there is no seriousness on the part of the functionaries and the public as far as GSs are concerned in the State.

Citizens in the selected GPs were interviewed to ascertain whether they are aware of GSs and if so, the extent of their participation. The results of this exercise are presented in Table-2. It can be seen from the table that an overwhelming majority (74.67 percent) of both men and women expressed that they are aware of GSs. However, in contrast to this, the participation in GSs is not as overwhelming as their awareness levels. The aggregate level of participation in the GSs accounts for 45.33 percent only. Of this, the participation level of women constitutes 40 percent compared to 60 percent of male citizens. The extent of participation of citizens in the GSs as revealed from above is quite good. However, one thing that needs to be clarified is whether the citizens actually attended GSs called by GPs, or meetings convened under Prajasa Vaddaku Palana (PVP), which is also a kind of GS and a part of the State-sponsored 'Janmabhoomi' programme (detailed discussion on this programme follows).

The awareness levels of citizens with regard to GSs are high because of the popularity of the PVP programme. In our sample the citizens were unable to distinguish clearly which of the GSs they attended since the Sarpanch of the local GP presides over both the types of GSs. However, quite a good number of those who attended GSs revealed that their participation was in PVP related GSs. From this it may be concluded that the citizens by and large participated in the PVP programme. Thus, from the above information two pertinent questions need to be answered. One, what prevented the authorities of GPs from convening GSs from time to time? And second, why is there a lukewarm response of citizens to such meetings?

Table 2: Awareness and Participation Levels of Citizens in Gram Sabhas in the Selected GPs of Kurnool District

(in Nos.)

Gram Panchayat*	Gram Sabha				Total	Participation in Gram Sabha				Total
	Aware	%	Not Aware	%		Participated	%	Not Participated	%	
GP - A										
Male	23	85.19	4	14.81	27	17	62.96	10	37.04	27
Female	15	65.22	8	34.78	23	10	43.48	13	56.52	23
Total	38	79.41	12	24.00	50	27	54.00	23	46.00	50
GP - B										
Male	27	79.41	7	20.59	34	22	64.71	12	35.29	34
Female	9	56.25	7	43.75	16	4	25.00	12	75.00	16
Total	36	72.00	14	28.00	50	26	52.00	24	48.00	50
GP - C										
Male	31	88.57	4	11.43	35	18	60.00	12	40.00	30
Female	12	80.00	3	20.00	15	11	55.00	9	45.00	20
Total	43	86.00	7	14.00	50	29	58.00	21	42.00	50
GP - D										
Male	22	81.48	5	18.52	27	8	29.63	19	70.37	27
Female	18	78.26	5	21.74	23	10	43.48	13	56.52	23
Total	40	80.00	10	20.00	50	18	36.00	32	64.00	50

Gram Panchayat*	Gram Sabha				Total	Participation in Gram Sabha				Total
	Aware	%	Not Aware	%		Participated	%	Not Participated	%	
GP - E										
Male	22	64.71	12	35.29	34	11	34.38	21	65.63	32
Female	10	62.50	6	37.50	16	5	27.78	13	72.22	18
Total	32	64.00	18	36.00	50	16	32.00	34	68.00	50
GP - F										
Male	19	54.29	16	45.71	35	12	40.00	18	60.00	30
Female	8	53.33	7	46.67	15	8	40.00	12	60.00	20
Total	27	54.00	23	46.00	50	20	40.00	30	60.00	50
Total of Six GPs										
Male	147	76.56	45	23.44	192	88	48.89	92	51.11	180
Female	77	71.30	31	28.70	108	48	40.00	72	60.00	120
Grand Total	224	74.67	76	25.33	300	136	45.33	164	54.67	300

Note: * names of GPs kept anonymous for various reasons.

Factors Responsible for Non-functioning of GSs

Among a large number of factors which contributed to the non-functioning and ineffectiveness of GSs in AP State, the following are important:

One, the functionaries of GPs, by and large, are not interested to conduct GSs because their omissions and commissions discourage them to face people directly in the GSs. In this context, it may be of interest to note that the misuse of funds by the panchayats (all the three-tiers) from 1980 to 1997 in the State is to the tune of Rs.980 crore. Further, the number of objections raised in the audit reports exclusively at the GP level was 10,28,285 (Institute of Social Sciences, 1997: 5). Added to this, the opposition parties take the opportunity to corner the ruling members. As a result of all these, GSs are not being held regularly. To fulfill the obligation imposed by the Act, fictitious records are made in the resolution books to show that GSs were actually held. For instance, in the first GP (Table 1), the third GS meeting had been recorded but without the details of deliberations and resolutions passed and without the signatures of the Sarpanch, the members, officials and the public. In fact, the Village Development Officer (VDO) of the GP put his signature under the minutes of meeting in front of us and also advised the Sarpanch that during the deliberations the signatures of those present in the meetings should be taken. Actually, it is the duty of the VDO to take signatures of those present in the meeting, but the officer was advising the Sarpanch to do the same from the next meeting! This only demonstrates that the VDO does not make arrangements to conduct GSs and record the business transacted.

The VDOs of other selected GPs whose workplace is the Mandal Parishad office placed before us the proceedings books relating to GP meetings but not that of GS meetings. They avoided this by saying that the GS proceedings books were kept in the GP office/Sarpanch's residence. When we approached one of the Sarpanches at his residence for the GS proceedings book, he informed us that the same was available at the GP office. But the office-bearers of the GP, in turn, told us that it was kept in the Sarpanch's house. This indicates that there is more to conceal than to reveal about the functioning of GSs by the functionaries of GPs. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Kurnool ZP held the same view when he said that "..... many of the Sarpanches especially in remote areas are in the habit of manipulation of the records and writing resolutions even without the knowledge of GP members to show the inspecting officer that the Sarpanch is conducting GSs and GP meetings regularly, to avoid disqualification" (Reddy, 1998: 4). A study of PRIs, particularly the GSs in AP State, also brings out the same point. Most often the GS meetings are not convened regularly in the majority of the cases. The meetings are manipulated in the villages where group politics

is active. The resolutions of such unheld meetings are passed by getting signatures of the members of the Sarpanch's group (Chandrashekar, 2000: 24). Thus, the GP authorities are not serious about conducting GSs from time to time and so the public attitude towards them is not different either.

Secondly, the limited powers and functions, revenues and expenditures of GPs prevent them from convening GSs and seeking fresh project proposals/needs from the public. As noted earlier, the State has not transferred all the functions enumerated under Schedule I and II of the Act to PRIs. Further, the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) which is implementing a large number of anti-poverty programmes at the district level is working outside the purview of PRIs, under the overall supervision of the District Collector. Similarly, many other development programmes such as housing, million wells programme (MWP), etc., are kept away from the PRIs. As if this is not enough, the State has made inroads into some of the basic functions of PRIs. For instance, maintenance of 15,000 kms of panchayat roads has been transferred to the Roads and Buildings (R & B) department of the State government. The Chief Minister, defending the action, said that 'the R & B department would be able to maintain them efficiently and the rural people would not fail to notice the difference' (Institute of Social Sciences, 1998: 1). Thus, first of all the State has delegated very limited powers and functions to PRIs and to top it a trend has been set to withdraw some of the functions already assigned to them.

To secure the rightful powers and functions, the non-official members and chairpersons of different levels of panchayats in the State have formed associations. One such association is called as 'AP Panchayat Sarpanches' Sangham' (APPSS). These associations have resorted to agitation quite a few number of times and their members have even gone to the extent of committing self-immolation. The APPSS had organised what is called 'Shankharavam' (war-cry) all over the State. This was to highlight the plight of local bodies in the wake of the government's reluctance to devolve powers in accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (Institute of Social Sciences, 1998:1). Again, the chairpersons of ZPs in the State had met the Chief Minister as well as the Panchayat Raj Minister to highlight the plight of PRIs and to bestow the powers and functions which rightfully belong to the local governments. Consequent to the pressure exerted on the State government by these associations, an expert Committee was constituted to study the powers and functions that should be devolved to PRIs. Based on the recommendations of this Committee, the State during March - April 1999 decided to transfer 16 functions to the panchayats out of the 29 functions enumerated in the Act (Chandrashekar, 2000: 32). Although, the State government had agreed to transfer some of the functions to PRIs, in practice the transfer of the additional

responsibilities is still due (Subrahmanyam, 2000: 6). This shows that the State is reluctant to share power with PRIs but at the same time wants a decentralised system to be there!

Equally important for efficient functioning of PRIs is their resource position. A glance at the revenues and expenditures of six GPs in Kurnool district reveals that the average annual revenue from all sources of a GP is Rs.1.3 lakh and the average annual expenditure is just Rs.90,000 (Babu, 2002: 92-98). It is also worth observing the results computed from the data given by the Eleventh Finance Commission (EFC) of India with regard to the expenditure levels of GPs in various States. This information is presented in Table-3. The per capita expenditure of GPs reveals that in AP it is Rs.59 per annum, Karnataka Rs.78, Kerala Rs.206, Madhya Pradesh Rs.139, Maharashtra Rs.111, Rajasthan Rs.242, and in West Bengal it is Rs.64. The average per capita expenditure of the GPs at all the states level is Rs.86, which is above that of AP. The low resource position exists not only at the GP level but also in other tiers of panchayats in the State.

Table 3: Level of Expenditure of Grama Panchayats in the Selected States during 1997-98

State	Total Expenditure (Rs.lakh)	Rural Population (1991)	Per Capita Expenditure (Rs)
Andhra Pradesh	28803.92	48620882	59
Karnataka	24365.02	31069413	78
Kerala	44057.89	21418224	206
Madhya Pradesh	70767.86	50842333	139
Maharashtra	53755.06	48395601	111
Rajasthan	82123.69	33938877	242
West Bengal	31515.93	49370364	64
Total (for 25 States)	536715.79	624158713	86

Source: Government of India, 'Eleventh Finance Commission', pp. 232 - 242.

The first State Finance Commission (SFC) set up by the State government had recommended devolution of 39.24 percent of the State's own tax and non-tax revenues to the PRIs. Against this recommendation, the actual transfer of revenues to the PRIs from the State works out to just 11.09 percent (Babu, 2002: 76). All the three-tier PRIs have been affected by this low revenue transfers from the State. A study of the financial position of GPs in AP observes that "the

GP a basic tier is almost neglected financially and remained static, backward and economically poor" (Dwarakanath, 1998: 72). Obviously, the GPs are functionally and financially weak, and cannot take the responsibility of providing basic services and community development. The people, by and large, therefore, have lost confidence (including elected representatives) in the PRIs and they hardly have any incentive to attend the GS meetings at the cost of their time, wages and own work.

Thirdly, a piquant situation encountered by PRIs in the State is that the personnel working in these institutions are grossly inadequate to the responsibilities entrusted. Though, on paper sufficient number of posts have been created, the government has failed to fill all these posts over the years. Information such as the number of sanctioned posts and the actual number working in PRIs in Kurnool district is shown in Table-4. From the table it is clear that around 42 percent of personnel have not been posted at all the three levels. Further a study of the same issue in different districts of AP brings out the same point. According to this study, in East Godavari district, against the sanctioned posts of 57 Mandal Parishad Development Officers (MPDOs), as many as 42 posts (74 percent) are vacant. Similarly in Nalgonda district, 22 posts out of a sanctioned strength of 59 posts (37 percent) of MPDOs are vacant. The situation is the same at the GP and ZP level also (Subrahmanyam, 2000: 10). Lack of personnel in PRIs, particularly at the GP level affects the conduct of GSs, smooth governance and implementation of development activities. In the absence of staff at GPs, the Sarpanches never conduct GSs and in turn manipulate the proceedings books.

Table - 4: Personnel Available at Different Levels of PRIs in Kurnool District during 1997-98

Panchayat Tier	Personnel	Total No. of Sanctioned Posts	Actual No. Working	4 as % of 3
1	2	3	4	5
1. GPs	VDO	291	169	58.00
2. MPs	MPDO	53	30	57.00
3. ZP	Class I & II	5	3	60.00
Total		349	202	58.10

Fourthly, in AP, the Sarpanch of GP is elected directly by the voters. Generally, a well-known person in the village, having a large clout contests for the Sarpanch's position. Added to this, the Sarpanch has been given the cheque drawing power, which earlier was vested

with the panchayat official. And he/she is allowed to execute the projects/schemes under Jawahar Rojgar Yojana on his/her own. Thus, the Sarpanch is supreme in the local area and in fact, by virtue of his/her status and powers bestowed, the Sarpanch is considered as more powerful than the Chairman of the Zilla Parishad. It was revealed in the study area that the prospective candidates prefer to contest for the Sarpanch position rather than for Mandal and Zilla Parishad seats. A large number of MPTC (Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency) and ZPTC (Zilla Parishad Territorial Constituency) members expressed that their main function was to attend the meetings convened by their chairpersons. Further, of the three programmes entrusted to the district and mandal level panchayats, a major portion of their grant goes towards the salaries of the teachers and in the other two, the state level engineering department wields power not only in the technical sanction but also in the disbursement for execution of works. Naturally, the public, including women and other weaker sections show greater reverence to the Sarpanch and regard him/her in high esteem. They repose full faith in the Sarpanch, on the ground that he/she is powerful and knowledgeable about the problems of the people and the village and accordingly, takes action to solve them impartially. Thus, on the one hand, the public neither questions the authority of the Sarpanch nor participates in the GS meetings. The Sarpanch, on his part takes advantage of the innocence of the public and does not care to convene GSs. To meet the obligation imposed by the Act, fictitious records are being built in the concerned registers as observed earlier.

Fifthly, certain regions in the State, particularly Rayalaseema and Telengana (constituting around two-thirds of the State's total area), are infected with factional politics and naxalite menace from the People's War Group (PWG) respectively. Killings and murders of party workers and leaders by the rival political groups are a common phenomenon in the former region. In the latter, the encounter is going on between the government, bureaucracy and the rural elite on the one hand, while on the other hand, the PWG represent the landless and other deprived castes over the existence of feudalism, landlordism and inequalities in rural society. It was observed by a writer that naxalism is not a law and order problem but rooted in social injustice, exploitation and under development (Akhileshwari, 2000a: 12). Very recently, i.e., during March 2000, the State panchayat raj minister was killed in a land mine explosion allegedly planted by the activists of PWG. The victims also include Sarpanches in both the regions. It is worth recalling here that gunmen always guard the heads of certain panchayats, including the heads of GPs in the study area. A few members and chairpersons of the selected Mandals and Zilla Parishad did not entertain us when we went to canvas our questionnaire among them. The prevalence of violent conditions in the rural areas of these regions prevents the GP authorities from

convening GS meetings. Even, if the GP convenes GS meetings, the fear of violence during the meetings prevents men and women from attending the meetings.

Further, the prevalence of factional politics is, in fact, one of the reasons for large scale winning of panchayat members unopposed during 1995 elections. In this context it is apt to look at the election results in the entire Kurnool district and also in the selected Mandal and Gram Panchayats which are presented in Table-5. It can be seen from the table that in Kurnool district about 23 percent of the members have been elected unopposed at the ZP level, 24 percent at the Mandal level and 38 percent at the GP level. The situation is still worse in the selected Mandals and GPs in the same district. The percentage of members who won unopposed at the MP level was 67 percent and at the GP level it was 77 percent. It may be added here that the unopposed winning of elections does not suggest that the persons concerned are the consensus candidates. The fact is that when the local strongman announces his desire to contest, no one else has the courage to file their nomination for the election. Obviously, honest and committed persons are kept away from electoral politics. When persons of doubtful character are returned to the office, not only do such persons not have respect for the democratic principles but people also do not wish to get into trouble by attending the GS meetings, if at all they are convened.

Table 5: Number of Members Elected Unopposed and Contest in the Elections to PRIs during 1995 in Kurnool District

(in Nos.)

Panchayat	All Panchayats of the Kurnool District			Selected Panchayats		
	Un-opposed	Contest	Total	Un-opposed	Contest	Total
ZP	12 (22.7)	41 (77.3)	53 (100.00)	12 (22.7)	41 (77.3)	53 (100.0)
MPs	164 (24.10)	498 (75.23)	681 (100.00)	40 (66.7)	20 (33.3)	60 (100.0)
GPs	329 (37.77)	548 (62.49)	871 (100.00)	54 (77.2)	16 (22.8)	70 (100.0)
Total	505 (31.72)	1087 (68.28)	1592 (100.00)	106 (57.9)	77 (42.1)	183 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages to the respective row total.

Sources: (1) District Panchayat Office, Kurnool. (2) Offices of the selected panchayats

Sixthly, of late, the State government has usurped some special programmes and appointed a few non-formal committees for promoting rural development, bypassing the local elected institutions. 'Janmabhoomi' (literally, land of birth) which is one of the major development programmes launched in the State in the year 1997 is a good example. The programme is to be held once in three months, i.e., four times in a year, for seven days duration each time. This programme has three components: a) 'Prajala Vaddaku Palana' - PVP (government at the doorsteps of the people) or Gram Sabhas b) Shramadhanam (donation of labour) and c) micro planning. First, under PVP, the problems of people and villages are identified. The power to conduct PVP meetings has been entrusted to a nodal agency at the Mandal level, which consists of government officials. The Janmabhoomi programme basically envisages participation of people in all aspects of their own development. It intends to involve people in the identification of local community needs, formulation and implementation of the plans with the people contributing free labour to the extent of 30 percent of the total project cost and the government rendering required material support (Sreenivasulu, 1999: 16). People's participation, equity and equality, transparency and accountability constitute the core principles of the programme (Venkateswaralu, 1999: 16). Broadly, the projects/schemes envisaged under the programme include direct benefits for the individuals, infrastructure and community based development activities. The individual benefits among others include pension for the aged and widows, liquified petroleum gas (LPG) connection, roshini (scheme for muslim women), houses, house sites. The latter comprises construction and repair of roads, culverts, bridges, desilting of tanks, bus shelters, human and animal hospitals, afforestation, etc.

This apart, a number of non-formal committees/associations some of them are the 'village education committee' (VEC) to oversee the working of schools, 'health committee' to supervise the functioning of hospitals, 'vana samrakshana samithi' (VSS) for social forestry development, 'water users' association' (WUA) for operation and maintenance of irrigation works and 'watershed associations' have been formed at the village level. These committees/associations have democratic content since they are constituted through election. They have been given powers to identify the problems and needs in their respective areas, and to prepare plans to fulfill them with financial assistance from the government (Venkateswarlu, 1999: 17). It may be observed, for instance that the funds are released directly to the VEC by the government to take up construction of school rooms, purchase of teaching and learning materials, etc. (Jayalakshmi, 2001: 5). Similarly, the VSSs and WUAs are implementing programmes with World Bank assistance in their respective areas. These local organisations ignore the imperative of institution building in the rural sector, by assuming

functions, which legitimately belong to the functional domain of the local government.

The new programmes, particularly the 'Janmabhoomi', command more weightage than the PRIs. The reason is that the former is actively involved and patronised by the ministers, members of the State Legislature and Parliament, bureaucracy, and the elected representatives of PRIs (though reluctantly). The Chief Minister of the State evinces keen interest in the implementation of Janmabhoomi programme. He monitors and reviews the progress of every phase of the programme. Further, it may be noted here that no official is allowed to go on leave during the (one-week) implementation of the Janmabhoomi programme. They will have a horrendous task in their hands of motivating the public and other organisations to attend the PVP meetings and to participate in the implementation of the projects/schemes. The college students were lured to participate in the 11th phase of Janmabhoomi by offering them some incentives. The major component of this phase of the programme was to collect household data and prepare micro-plans for the development of villages and Mandals. About 1.5 lakh students were requisitioned for training and were assigned the above tasks. For this gesture, the government promised Rs.50 per day as daily expenses and 10 grace marks for each student. The opposition parties and some student unions objected to this bounty and filed a writ petition in the State High Court, which in turn admitted it for hearing (Deccan Herald, 2000a: 7).

Special Janmabhoomi programmes have been organised very recently, such as the Mahila (women) Janmabhoomi. The intention of organising such a special programme is to mobilise and empower the women folk. The mode of achieving this goal is through self-help groups (SHGs). For this special programme, in spite of a resource crunch the government released Rs.700 crore of which Rs.33 crore is earmarked for the SHGs' revolving fund (Akhileshwari, 2000b: 10). Yet another exclusive GS, namely 'Power Gram Sabha', was organised with the main objective of regularising illegal electric connections of the consumers and educating them on the need to increase the power tariff. It was said that nearly 30,000 applications were received from the people to regularise the illegal connections (Deccan Herald, 2000b: 7).

If these are the positive aspects of the programme, there are also negative voices raised against it. It is alleged that the funds meant for rural development under the Centrally sponsored schemes such as JRY, Rajiv Yojana, Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) and others are diverted to the Janmabhoomi programme from PRIs (Deccan Herald, 1998: 6; Reddy, 1999: 18). When the diversion of funds meant for specific programmes to a State sponsored programme was opposed, the then Union Minister for rural development issued a statement saying

that there is nothing wrong in it as long as the grants flow for rural development. This shows how 'politics of convenience' is practised in the country. Again, it may be noted with regret that the World Bank specifically prescribed that its loan to the State be spent through Janmabhoomi and other related programmes (Reddy, 1999: 18; Subrahmanyam, 2000: 6).

Thus, the Janmabhoomi and the other village level committees have become a kind of State administered parallel institutions, which possess greater clout, credibility, resources and incentives - all capable of attracting people. These institutions have blurred the statutorily created decentralised institutions in the State leading to weakening of PRIs and credibility loss in the eyes of the general public (Babu, 2002: 83; Jayalakshmi, 2000: 10). The PRIs are supposed to take the government to people's doorsteps, but it is the Janmabhoomi and other programmes which are just doing that. Since there is no direct and instant benefits for the people under GPs, naturally they have turned to State sponsored programmes.

Lastly, generally speaking, women do not participate in the GS meetings due to the age-old social taboos. In a male dominated society, women think that their duty is to look after the house and family, leaving outside work to be taken care of by male members. Our enquiries with the village people revealed that women feel shy to come out of their houses, to attend and speak in public meetings. Their contention is that if they attend and speak in the GS meeting, it would amount to showing disrespect to the male and elderly leaders, like the Sarpanch. As such, they keep away from attending the GS meetings. In contrast to this general attitude of the women, the State has witnessed a successful movement by women known as the 'Anti Arrack Movement' in the early 1990s. Similarly, the State has made some strides in the women development programme namely, 'Self Help Groups' (SHGs). However, women in general have not shown inclination to participate in the GSs.

Conclusion and Suggestions

It is evident that the State has initiated the process of decentralisation. The weaker sections of society have been given representation in the PRIs through reservations. The GS below the GP has been incorporated into the structure as far back as 1959 and the same has been continued in the subsequent State PR Acts. Notwithstanding the provision for GS in the Act, the GPs are not conducting GS meetings regularly. Added to this, there is no enthusiasm on the part of the public to participate in such GS meetings. Due to the saddening state of GSs in the country, the then Union government, in its budget for 1999-2000 has laid a greater emphasis on GPs and also on Gram Sabhas. In fact, the Union

Finance Minister declared the year 1999-2000 as the 'Year of Gram Sabha' (Babu, 1999: 8).

In AP, as touched upon earlier, social, economic, political and other factors are obstructing proper functioning of GSs. Keeping the Union government's zeal to strengthen GPs and GSs in mind, the State government, functionaries of PRIs and the public should strive for the orderly conduct and success of GSs. For this, as a pre-condition, a conducive and workable atmosphere has to be imbibed into PRIs. As a first step towards this end, the PRIs have to be strengthened by devolving to them their actual domain of functions. The functions stated in the PR Act and specially the 29 development subjects enumerated under Schedule-I have to be transferred to GPs. Further, the DRDA and other programmes implemented through different agencies at the sub-state level have to be appropriately transferred to the three-tiers of panchayats. And, in these, a major role has to be entrusted to the grassroots level body, namely, the GP. Along with powers and functions, the State should forthwith act upon the SFC recommendation to share its revenues equivalent to 39.24 percent with PRIs.

With regard to the position of Sarpanch, it is worth considering that the election of Sarpanch should be indirect, i.e., elected from among the members of the GP rather than directly from the voters. This is the pattern in the other two tiers of panchayats in the State and in most of the other States in India. The experience in Karnataka in the matter of governance at the GP level shows that the decisions taken by and large are unanimous. It may not be out of context to state here that the Bangalore Rural Zilla Parishad during its first term of office (1987-88 to 1991-92) had passed all the resolutions unanimously in spite of the ruling party's overwhelming majority. But this is not so in the case GPs in AP State. The Sarpanch takes every decision unilaterally. Through indirect election the superiority complex of the Sarpanch can be put on hold and the position would become one among the equals. In the matter of execution of projects/schemes of GP, it should not be entrusted solely to one man i.e., the Sarpanch. Rather, the entire GP should be made responsible for the implementation of panchayat programmes. Again, the cheque drawing power has been given to the Sarpanch, with a condition that he should nominate either the VDO or any one of the members of the GP. However, in most cases the Sarpanches have nominated illiterate and ignorant members for countersigning purpose. In this regard, it is worth referring to an instance of how a nominated member exercised his power. In one of the selected GPs, the VDO on the request of the Sarpanch filled the cheque to draw money for the completed work. The Sarpanch put his signature on the cheque and he then informed the officer to get it counter signed from the nominated member. On the way to bus stop, the VDO luckily saw the same member and asked him to sign on the cheque. He, in turn, blindly stamped his

signature without seeking any clarification or justification for drawing money from the bank. Therefore, to avoid misuse of funds by the heads of GPs, it is better to make it obligatory on the part of Sarpanches to nominate only the official of the GP for the purpose, as was the practice for some time earlier. These measures, if initiated, would put a halt to the dictatorial style of functioning and checks and balances on the actions and decisions of the Sarpanch.

The prevalence of factional politics and naxalite movement in large areas of the State is actually destroying the basic tenets of democracy and social fabric. These twin evils have to be ruthlessly curbed before they make inroads into other areas of the State. To achieve this objective, a conducive political atmosphere of free entry and exit of prospective political leaders in the democratic polity should be created. Whichever party that heads the government at the State level should strive to practise the politics of consensus on major issues, respect the defeated candidates in the elections and the leaders of opposition parties and, discourage the ruling party workers from unleashing violence on the opposition party workers. Further, the feudalistic, landlord-serfdom nature of society has to be transformed to a democratic and just society. For this transformation to take place, implementation of special anti-poverty programs and land reforms is a must.

Again, strong awareness has to be created among women about the irrelevance of old social taboos and their potential role in the upliftment of women and children through PRIs. Now, a movement has emerged in the State for mobilisation of women and empowering them economically through SHGs. These women in turn need to focus their attention and energies on the panchayats' activities to hasten the rural and their own development.

The elected representatives of PRIs should not shirk their responsibilities. Whatever may be their position and abilities, in the given circumstance, they should do everything possible with the consent of people, and that is possible only through GSs. All this requires commitment and cooperation of all the parties, honesty and transparency in the administration and support of people's and non-governmental organisations. To achieve this goal, there is need to upgrade skills of the panchayat functionaries. Both the elected representatives and officials of all the three-tiers must be imparted training on governance and planning and this should be repeated every year.

The remedial measures suggested above would be of no use if the existing parallel programmes and institutions continue to play their active role in rural areas at the cost of the statutorily created PRIs. The present precarious position of PRIs in the State and the domination of

State-sponsored programmes leads us to conclude that there is no need for decentralised governments in the State. However, there is no real substitute system of governance for the democratically elected local governments. The non-statutorily created institutions will have no sanction of the people. Again, the programs implemented through non-statutory organisations and bureaucracy are temporary in nature and they cease to exist once the sponsors lose confidence in them. They also undergo changes whenever a new government takes over the mantle of running the government at the State. In reality, in the past the new governments by and large changed the policies and programmes of the previous regime. Therefore, their sustenance for a longer period is doubtful. After the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the local governments are assured of their continuation. The panchayat model is the ideal institution for the delivery system. The principle of 'local functions for local governments' should be adhered to. On this ground, it is better to implement all those functions concerning the local area through local governments only. Therefore, there is need for merging of the existing major development programme, namely, the Janmabhoomi with the PRIs. The same principle holds good for the village level committees/associations. Either they should be discontinued or should become sub committees of PRIs. If these local area principles are followed sincerely and strictly, then there will be legitimacy of PRIs and GSs.

Above all, there is a need for bestowing legal status on GS. The Constitution has left it to the respective States to legislate on the powers and functions of the GS. The AP State PR Act has prescribed the functions to be performed by the GS. But it is silent on the powers of the GS, like the quorum, fate of resolutions passed, action to be taken on the authorities for failure to convene meetings in the prescribed time periods, etc. Added to this, there is no proper linkage between the different tiers of PRIs in the State. As such there is very little control over GPs on the issue of GS by the immediate higher tier, namely, the MP. The government of Madhya Pradesh has taken initiation to strengthen GS in the state. Towards this end a Bill was passed in the State Legislature and the same was forwarded to the Governor for assent. The important features incorporated in the Bill are: frequency of meeting is monthly, a minimum quorum of 20 percent of the village adults; control over village level officials; standing committees for various purposes; final authority in the matter of payment for the works executed, etc. (Herdenia, 2001). In Karnataka, the PR Act provides for intervention by the Executive Officer of the Taluk Panchayat and empowers the officer to convene GSs if the GP fails to do so (Puliani, 1998: 45). To make GSs functional, then there is a need for giving Constitutional power for holding GSs compulsorily. Similarly, the AP PR Act should incorporate the powers of the GS and the role of higher tier in case there is a failure on the part of

GPs in fulfilling the obligation. It should be made mandatory that the Mandal Parishad Development Officer of the MP designate an officer from his office or an officer from any of the mandal level department to participate in the GSs as moderator. This system is in vogue in Karnataka since a year (Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department, 1999a: 1).

Further, to make GSs more effective and useful, it is necessary to make development planning by PRIs at the grassroots level, namely in the GS itself. It is a forum that should be used for communicating to the people the development priorities of the national, state and district level governments and ascertaining from the people the manner in which these policies and programmes can be interpreted and implemented for their benefit. This is also a forum where people's participation in plan formulation and implementation could be sought. For this purpose, it is necessary that the role of the GS be seen as covering planning and implementation of programmes not only of the GPs but also those of the MPs and ZPs as well. The government of Karnataka has taken the initiative to make bottom up planning a reality (Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department, 1999b: 1). This process of planning not only demands the participation of representatives of all the three-tiers, concerned officers and the public in the GS meetings but also binds the GP authorities to conduct GSs regularly and in a fruitful manner.

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