

## Gram Sabha Meetings: Precept and Practice in Sirsa District of Haryana

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Although the Union Finance Minister in his 1999 budget speech declared the 1999-2000 as the Year of the Gram Sabha, adequate efforts were not made to enforce the declaration excepting in a few states like West Bengal and Kerala. The culture of not holding GS meetings got wide currency because the elected bodies and officials wanted to implement various developmental programmes in secrecy. The caste and class differences have further reduced this crucial body to a namesake institution for local governance. However, there are quite a few oases of positive action and hope in the desert of inertia and despondency. These are basically creations of individual initiative. Such is the case of Sirsa district where GS meetings were held in a campaign mode at the initiative of the Deputy Commissioner and Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC). This article is based on experiences of nine GS meetings held in different blocks of the district during April - May 2007.

These meetings were held with the purpose of providing villagers with information regarding various schemes implemented by panchayats and expenditure incurred on the activities carried out in the villages by the respective departments. Along with this, opinion of the village assembly was also sought on the quality of work carried out during the reference period. The other purpose was to solve the problems, if any, faced by the villagers in the implementation of various programmes, to register the demands raised by them and to take corrective action.

The programme for conducting GS meetings was chalked out systematically. A group of fifteen gram panchayats (GPs) of a block was taken as a cluster. The meetings were organised in public places like schools or panchayat ghars situated in the middle of the village to ensure maximum participation of the villagers. After holding the meeting, the proceedings of these meetings were drafted by the gram sacniv and signed by the sarpanch and officer-in-charge of the meeting. Finally, the Chief Coordinator, ADC, used to examine the proceedings.

**Issues addressed:** Generally, the issues raised in these meetings related to drinking water, lack of doctors and non-availability of medicines and X-ray machines in the primary health centres, encroachment of common land, non-construction of school building and additional rooms, electricity problems, ineffective aganwadi workers, lack of transport facilities, construction of IAY houses for ineligible households, non-issuance of BPL cards, and disputes about measurement of work under NREGA

**Outcome:** (1) There was a lot of awareness about the GS meetings in the village community. Since villagers had come to know about these meetings for the first time, they were initially skeptical about the announcement of the presence of the officials and the visit of the ADC in these meetings. (2) Villagers raised a number of problems affecting them. This was mainly because of an impressive gathering of people and officials. (3) Different committees pertaining to education, health, sanitation, etc., were formed or reconstituted where the existing members had not shown any interest in

their activities. (4) Opinion of the villagers about the functioning of the panchayat employees, particularly the Rozgar Sahayaks appointed by the panchayat for attending to NREGS work, was obtained and decision about their continuance in the service was taken accordingly. A panel of Mates was also prepared to oversee the work of the villagers who were given jobs under NREGA. (5) The holding of the meetings also proved a capacity building exercise for the officials and presidents of the panchayats and chairpersons of various subject committees. Officials had done their homework before attending the meetings. The speeches of some of the officials were so effective that they may be appointed by state level institutions as state level trainers (6) This exercise also gave the opportunity to the district administration to have first hand information about the problems relating to various state departments, being faced by the people.

To conclude, the efforts made by the district administration towards organising GS meetings were really commendable and should serve as a beacon point for others. There were many lessons to learn. The holding of the GS meetings and making them problem-solving bodies did, indeed, bring a fresh breeze in rural areas of Sirsa district.

**The writer belongs to Indian Economic Service and is presently working with the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.**

### SELECT READING

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- N. Ramakantan: Democratic Decentralisation and Empowerment of Local Government Associations in Kerala, *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, Issue 2
- Sunanda Mehta: Trust Vote, *The Indian Express*, April 26, 2009

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