



Enhancing public participation in Gram Sabha: Identifying barriers and developing effective strategies - a case study of Tufanganj-I Block, Cooch Behar, West Bengal

Mithun Debnath¹ and Dr. Aleya Mousami Sultana^{2*}

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India

*Corresponding author: Dr. Aleya Mousami Sultana

Received 3 Jun 2026; Accepted 13 Jul 2026; Published 25 Jul 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JSRD.5.3.46-51>

Abstract

The Gram Sabha serves as the constitutional platform for participatory governance within the Gram Panchayat. The absence of awareness, interest, favourable disposition, comprehension, and consensus among Gram Sabha members frequently results in restricted attendance and engagement. The current state of the Gram Sabha's operations across much of the country is quite precarious, given the premises upon which it was established. Following a thorough assessment of these specific aspects, the current study reveals that rural populations possess inadequate understanding of Panchayati Raj Institutions and the developmental initiatives enacted for their advantage. The citizen participation in the Gram Sabha in Tufanganj I Block of Cooch Behar is more or less unsatisfactory. Individuals regard Gram Sabha as a simple formality, as representatives have already been elected. In this communication we have analysed obstacles to participation through gradual survey in the Gram Sabha meetings in Tufanganj I Block and delineates solutions to enhance engagement. Also, we have enlightened the ways of increasing people's participation in Tufanganj-I Block, Cooch Behar, West Bengal. These approaches would also facilitate enhanced participation and engagement in Gram Sabha, so reinforcing the democratic process in other regions of the country.

Keywords: Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayat, Tufanganj-I Block, Democracy, Panchayati Raj System

Introduction

The Gram Sabha serves as the institutional basis for a decentralized participatory democracy. Since 1978, West Bengal has implemented decentralisation via the Panchayati Raj system. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India institutes a three-tier structure of local self-government, enabling the Gram Sabha to engage in essential local governance functions. The Gram Sabha serves as the constitutional platform for participatory governance within the Gram Panchayat (Madhavrao *et al.*, 2025) ^[12]. It is a collective of all adult members of a Gram Panchayat who possess the ability to vote, and it has been designed as a forum (Jain, 2017). It enables people to ascertain local need, suggest developmental initiatives, and endorse annual plans formulated by the Gram Panchayat (Prasad and Sole, 2019; Debnath, 2025) ^[13, 8]. This bottom-up planning process aims to ensure that development initiatives align with the genuine objectives of the community, including access to potable water, healthcare services, education, infrastructure, and employment opportunities (Datta 2001; Debnath, 2025) ^[6, 8]. The active participation of individuals is pivotal for the successful accomplishment of rural development programs by local self-governance in a democracy (Rana and Sagarika 2023) ^[14]. Enhancing the gram sabha institution is essential for reconciling the disparity between the intended and real effects

of government initiatives. Local self-governing institutions are essential for national growth and fostering citizen engagement in the democratic process (Abiddin *et al.*, 2022; Clark, 2022) ^[1, 5]. In spite of this, Gram Sabhas is not sufficiently operational to fulfil their role in the establishment of a robust Indian democracy. The primary factors appear to be insufficient public participation, inadequate awareness among elected representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions, perfunctory conduct of Gram Sabha meetings, ineffective communication of information, low attendance at Gram Sabha meetings, and a lack of clear comprehension among the populace regarding the significance and functions of the Gram Sabha. Therefore, it is essential to enhance the Gram Sabha by augmenting member participation in meetings, enabling direct involvement in governance.

Material and Methods

In order to investigate methods for improving public participation in Gram Sabha meetings in Tufanganj-I Block of Cooch Behar district, West Bengal, the current study used a descriptive and exploratory case study design. To gather quantitative and qualitative information about the current level of engagement, attendance obstacles, and potential improvement strategies, a mixed-method approach was employed. Both primary and secondary data served as the

study's foundation. Structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, casual conversations, and field observation were used to gather primary data from local citizens, elected Panchayat representatives, Gram Panchayat officials, members of self-help groups, community leaders, and other stakeholders. Panchayat records, Gram Sabha attendance records, meeting notifications, government reports, policy documents, and pertinent published literature on Panchayati Raj institutions and grassroots governance were the sources of secondary data. In order to guarantee participation from a variety of social groups, including as women, youth, the elderly, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, farmers, and daily wage labourers, specific Gram Panchayats within Tufanganj-I Block were purposefully chosen. The study looked at a number of factors, including knowledge of the Gram Sabha, attendance frequency, availability of meeting information, meeting time and location, participation of marginalised groups, the role of Panchayat representatives, decision-making transparency, and public confidence in local government institutions. Simple statistical tools like frequencies and percentages were used to analyse quantitative data, while thematic analysis of qualitative responses was used to identify key issues like lack of awareness, poor communication, political hesitation, gender barriers, social exclusion, and little decision-follow-up. Voluntary participation, answer confidentiality, and the use of data solely for academic reasons were all ensured by ethical measures.

Study area

Tufanganj I block is located within Cooch Behar district in northern part of West Bengal. The latitudinal and longitudinal extension of the study area approximately is 26°17'50" N to

26°20' N and 89°33' E to 89°37'30"E respectively. The study region is situated between the interfluvies of Ghargharia, Kaljani, Raidhak, and Sankaosh. The geographical area encompasses 320.75 square kilometres, with 14 Gram Panchayats and 73 Mouzas. The western, southwestern, and eastern peripheries of the research area are delineated by Koch Bihar, Dinhata, and Tufanganj Block-2 subdivisions of the same district, respectively, while the northern boundary is demarcated by Jalpaiguri District. In a brief segment in the Southeast, its boundary is conjoined with Bangladesh. It is a rural region primarily populated by the Rajbangshis. A significant portion of the population is impoverished and unemployed, primarily reliant on agriculture, agricultural wage labour, agriculture-related non-farm jobs, or temporary job schemes for their sustenance. Recently, fish-related hobbies and some other pursuits have surged in popularity. These considerations are manifested in the varied buffer statuses of the blocks. The Cooch Behar district possesses a distinctive topography. It is located in the foothills of the Himalayas and comprises a flat terrain within the Dooars region. It possesses abundant natural resources that facilitate agricultural development, fisheries, lumber, and quarrying. The Tufanganj I block is particularly rich in rivers. In the rainy season, the rivers inundate, and the surrounding area gets submerged. The rivers deposit a substantial volume of alluvium annually. With the exception of the north-eastern section of the block, all other regions are susceptible to flooding, resulting in farmers being inactive for around six months annually. Present study aims to analyse the current circumstances, identify the factors contributing to non-participation, and propose effective strategies to improve community involvement.

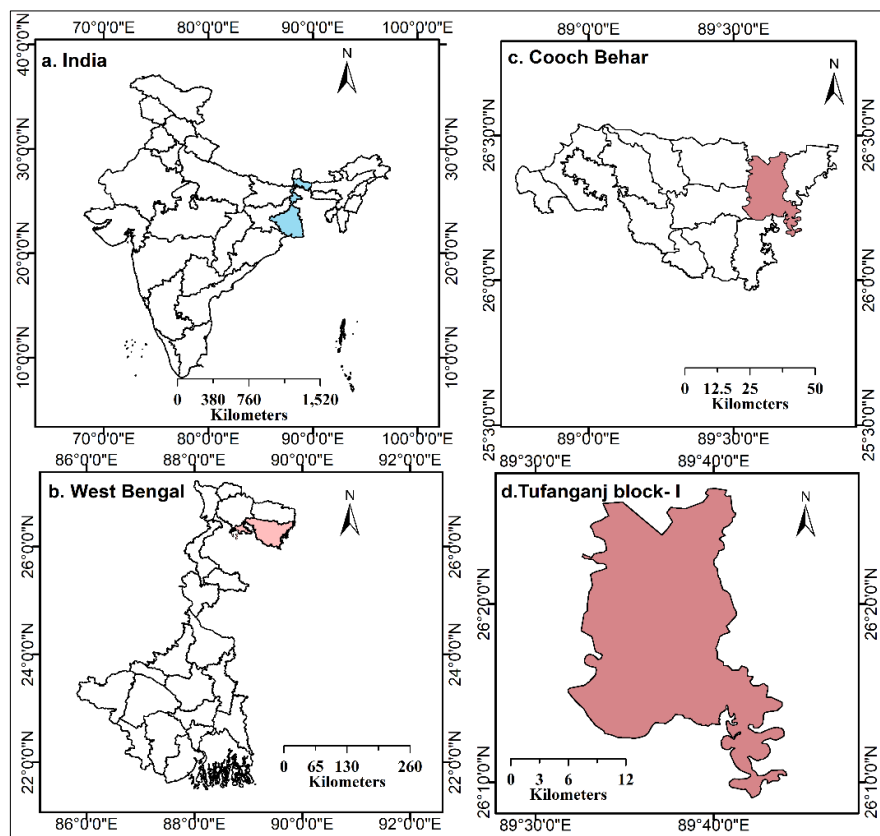


Fig 1: Location of the study site

Sampling

The study used a mixed-method approach and a descriptive case study design to investigate public involvement in Gram Sabha meetings in Tufanganj-I Block, Cooch Behar, West Bengal. While secondary data came from Panchayat records, Gram Sabha attendance registers, official reports, and pertinent literature, primary data was gathered through household surveys, key informant interviews, casual conversations, and field observation. The household survey was conducted using stratified random sampling, which yielded an estimated sample of 200 homes by choosing roughly 20–40 households from each Gram Panchayat. Twenty to thirty key informants, including Panchayat representatives, officials, community leaders, and members of women's and civil society organisations, were chosen through the use of purposeful sampling. Frequencies, percentages, and thematic analysis were used to examine the gathered data.

Objectives

- To examine the involvement of individuals in the gram sabha.
- To assess the level of awareness and efficacy of the Gram Sabha.
- To evaluate the perspectives of participants and non-participants regarding the role and significance of the gram sabha.

Analysis

The total numbers of respondents are 250. Among the 100 respondents are participants in Gram Sabhas, 100 respondents are participants and 50 respondents are panchayat members. Out of the 50 Panchayat members 25 male participants and 25 female participants have been taken. Of the 100 participants in Gram Sabhas, men and women constitute 50 each and, of the 100 non- participants, men and women constitute 50 each.

Result and Discussion

Based on the analysis of responses received from the respondents of the study sites and observation of several Gram Sabha meetings of the study sites we have explored some obstacles for participation of people as well as their potential solution.

Contextual overview on Gram Sabha of Tufanganj I Block

The administrative structure of Tufanganj I block closely resembles that of other administrative frameworks in India. The block serves as the operational unit for integrated development; the administration at this level seeks to coordinate numerous sectoral departments for comprehensive development. A Gram Panchayat is a village-level institution comprising a chairperson and several ward members elected by the rural populace to facilitate local self-governance. The Gram Panchayat, in conjunction with the Gram Sabha, constitutes the oversight and execution body for all plans and initiatives determined by the legislature relating to the Gram Sabha. All decisions made by the Gram Panchayat are the responsibility

of the Gram Sabha, where citizens exercise their ultimate authority through their elected representatives. The Sarpanch serves as the leader of the Gram Panchayat. The Gram Sabha constitutes the foundational element of the three-tier Panchayat system, operating at the village level or within a cluster of small villages. Its membership mostly consists of the adult resident population from the hamlet or settlements within its jurisdiction.

Present scenario of participation of public in Gram Sabhas of Tufanganj-I Block

The Gram Sabha at the village level serves as the central mechanism for engagement in self-governance in West Bengal following the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution (Bandyopadhyay, 2003) [4]. Many contemporary unpublished studies by the Panchayat and Rural Development Department revealed that less than 10% of villagers in the Tufanganj I Block participated in the Gram Sabha meeting. Public engagement in Gram Sabha meetings within Tufanganj I Block is significantly hindered by numerous social, cultural, and economic influences. The general public has minimal awareness of the Gram Sabha and its provisions. A considerable number of individuals fail to comprehend the importance of the Gram Sabha in the village-level decision-making process. Therefore, attempts to enhance knowledge among villagers and the capabilities of local individuals regarding Gram Sabha are critically important—these initiatives could potentially expand opportunities for public engagement in the Gram Sabha. While meeting agendas are posted at the Gram Panchayat Office, local publications fail to issue notices for Gram Sabha meetings in the Block. This inhibits numerous villagers from participating in the Sabha meetings. The transparency and accessibility of information at the village level remain significant challenges for Tufanganj I Block. The literacy rate in the Gram Sabha regarding the Bengali language is minimal. Consequently, communication continues to pose a concern in the region. Meetings at the local level, involving various stakeholders such as Panchayat members, local intellectuals, representatives of local organisations, Gram Sabha facilitators, and community development practitioners, can be organised to explore opportunities for establishing the Gram Sabha and improving public participation.

Citizen participation challenges in Gram Sabha

The general population exhibits a significant lack of awareness regarding the Gram Sabha and its provisions. A multitude of individuals fail to comprehend the importance of the Gram Sabha in the decision-making process at the village level. Therefore, attempts to enhance knowledge among villagers and the capabilities of local residents regarding Gram Sabha are critically important—these initiatives could potentially expand opportunities for public engagement in the Gram Sabha. While meeting agendas are posted at the Gram Panchayat Office, local publications fail to issue notices for Gram Sabha meetings in the Block. This hinders numerous villagers from

participating in the Sabha meetings. The transparency and accessibility of information at the village level remain significant challenges for Tufanganj I Block. The Gram Sabha's awareness and literacy in the Bengali language are deficient. Consequently, communication continues to pose a concern in the region. Meetings at the local level, involving various stakeholders such as Panchayat members, local intellectuals, representatives of local organizations, Gram Sabha facilitators, and community development practitioners, can be organized to explore opportunities for establishing the Gram Sabha and improving public participation.

Democratic practices in Tufanganj I Block are primarily overseen by the Gram Sabha, a crucial entity within the three-tiered local self-governance framework in rural regions. The Gram Sabha consists of all registered voters of a Gram Panchayat and convenes quarterly. The procedures occur in the Panchayat-eligible region of the Gram Panchayat, following the established model employed in West Bengal. Notwithstanding governmental policies promoting involvement, attendance in the Gram Sabha of Tufanganj I Block is persistently low, highlighting several barriers that hinder effective participation. Participation is crucial for accountability and serves as a self-development mechanism, commencing with grassroots demands and fostering the establishment of popular organisations. Effective involvement is primarily an art rather than a technical skill necessitating practice. A minimalist approach to public engagement has resulted in gaps that permit the passage of legislation with significant societal significance. There is considerable endorsement for establishing additional channels for citizen engagement in local governance, which is vital for a robust democracy. Strategies for public engagement must be incorporated throughout project cycles, particularly with marginalised communities. Public engagement includes communication, consultation, collaboration, and co-governance. The involvement program must be constantly evaluated and strengthened through outreach to ensure an integrated strategy. Ongoing communication is essential, encompassing the dissemination of information and education to citizens through websites, newsletters, media, and resource centres.

• **Social and cultural barriers**

Due to complex social structures, caste, ethnicity, religion, and gender play a crucial role in communicative participation. In this context, the people of Tufanganj I Block belong to different castes and ethnic groups. The Rajbangshis constitute the largest group and occupy the politically and economically dominant position in society. Gender significantly influences individuals' participation in local self-government institutions, such as the Gram Sabha. Patriarchy and male supremacy persist in the society of Tufanganj I Block. Men typically participate in local elections and engage in other aspects of local self-governance. Women, especially from marginalised groups, exhibit reluctance to engage. Women with partial control over resources actively exercise their rights; otherwise, their

engagement is minimal. Women's participation in various local self-government institutions encounters resistance, as is also the case with the Gram Sabha. It has become common for women to keep mute during the Gram Sabha meetings. Socio-cultural obstacles impede effective involvement, resulting in adverse effects on local governance.

• **Information asymmetry and communication gaps**

The gram sabha is integral to the participatory development model established within India's constitutional framework. In the Tufanganj I Block of West Bengal, the gram sabha is assembled in a centralised manner. A minimum of five meetings is conducted annually, following a standardised agenda mandated by the government. Nonetheless, public engagement in these meetings is inadequate, and numerous social and cultural obstacles hinder the involvement of marginalised populations in this democratic process. For a democratic process to achieve its intended objectives, pertinent information must be communicated to stakeholders when required. At the gram sabha level, the necessity for information pertains to the following five aspects: i) Modification of the schedule and location of the gram sabha meeting, ii) Thematic discourse document regarding the suggested agenda, iii) Awareness of the endorsed, authorised, and ratified action plans and financial allocations related to the yearly development plans from the preceding Gram Sabha meeting, and iv) Governance, regulations, and protocols of the Gram Sabha meeting.

• **Institutional constraints and resource limitations**

The local administration of Tufanganj-I block executes various State and Centrally Sponsored Schemes. A proficiently organised Gram Sanbha offers numerous options for citizens to request government services. The Gram Panchayat system in West Bengal, governed by the Panchayati Raj Act of 1973, provides residents with the opportunity for participation (Khawas, 2025) ^[1]. The Tufanganj I Block possesses sufficient workforce. Gram Sabhas possess the capacity to operate effectively. Nonetheless, engagement remains minimal despite efforts to streamline the procedure. The Panchayat Act stipulates a minimum of two Gram Sabhas per year. Nevertheless, numerous villages have not conducted a single Gram Sabha in the past five years. The Gram Sabha do not operate as stipulated by the Act, nor do the Gram Panchayet meetings occur as mandated (Ananda Gowda and Shashikumara, 2024) ^[2]. Despite the provision of numerous services and the implementation of strong awareness efforts in rural regions, there is a lack of demand or proposals for services at the Gram Sabha level. Their constitutional rights remain predominantly unactualized. The demand for rural housing, sanitation, and infrastructure remains substantial; nevertheless, the construction of these amenities scarcely commences.

Methodological approach for enhancing participation

Initiatives for awareness and capacity building to enhance public engagement in the gram sabha are essential in Tufanganj

I block, given the insufficient understanding of local governance and the potential advantages derived from participation in gram sabha sessions. These measures must include broader dissemination of information regarding the importance of gram sabhas, the subjects necessitating discussion in the meetings, and the methodology for presenting relevant questions and issues. Details on panchayati and state-level development plans, including beneficiaries and the criteria for benefits and selection, should be transparently disseminated to foster engagement in the gram sabha. It is essential to adopt inclusive deliberation procedures to enhance public engagement in the gram sabha. Every gram sabha meeting must allocate a five-minute interval for enquiries regarding the preceding meeting, and local organisations should be encouraged to establish official forums for discourse on diverse themes prior to the meetings. Public engagement in the gram sabha within the panchayati raj framework of local self-governance in rural India, has been recognised as a challenge in the Tufanganj I block of Cooch Behar district, West Bengal. The case study of Tufanganj I block underscores prevalent disengagement in gram sabha sessions and restricted participation, even among attendees. Based on an analysis of the political economy of participation and context-specific barriers to engagement, four strategies to enhance participation in the gram sabha are proposed: (i) awareness and capacity building, (ii) inclusive deliberation, (iii) transparent information dissemination, and (iv) incentive and accountability structures.

- **Awareness and capacity building strategies**

Multiple determinants adversely influence participation in the Gram Sabha at Tufanganj I Block. Several targeted initiatives have been suggested to enhance public participation. The primary measure involves educating Gram Sabha members and prospective members on their rights, duties, responsibilities, and impact on local governance decisions, plans, and development expenditures. Awareness-raising efforts, ideally incorporating experienced and motivated local individuals such as youth leaders, representative of several community and caste, social workers will effectively engage the target demographic. Workshops on the Gram Sabha and strategies to enhance participation should engage and educate local officials and Panchayat Pradhan, as they possess significant practical impact. Experts and technical specialists are essential for ensuring that public debates are substantive, particularly for the rural impoverished, who rely significantly on natural resources for their sustenance and income. Experts must exercise increased diligence to ensure impartiality in public debates and consistently attend public hearings with punctuality. Local women leaders warrant particular attention; their active and substantive involvement at all levels should be promoted, and the concerns they articulate in discussions should be addressed.

- **Inclusive deliberation mechanisms**

Facilitating inclusive deliberation procedures fosters comprehensive discussions that integrate multiple viewpoints

grounded on the collective knowledge of the Tufanganj I Block setting, resulting in well-rounded yet targeted deliberations instead of ideas devoid of thematic coherence. Regular public meetings establish access channels for Gram Sabha by providing updates on planning formation, execution, and outcome monitoring across several sectors, hence maintaining transparency in local development through Community Development Programme records. These discussions validate community priorities and establish limitations, such as funding availability, while defining the jurisdictional boundaries of the Gram Panchayat to facilitate contextually relevant suggestions. Public interest coordination is essential for establishing engagement protocols, elucidating subject matter, and mediating conflicting interests during global participation.

- **Utilisation of facilitation of local experts and councillors**

To achieve optimal efficiency, it is essential to choose persons who are recognised and trusted by the locals. Alongside local educators, healthcare professionals, and self-help group leaders, members of the village council are also viable candidates. Their particular interest in the Gram Sabha governance process drives them to advocate for the welfare of their respective villages. Several young elected councillors have already engaged in the awareness-raising phase of the Gram Sabha. Representatives at this level might be influenced to disseminate the idea among their fellow villagers that active engagement in the Gram Sabha and its operational activities will be advantageous for them and their community.

- **Transparent information dissemination**

Research indicates that gram sabha members face difficulties in obtaining timely information from the panchayat and other authorities. The findings indicate that the following areas may be investigated to augment access to information and facilitate informed participation in the gram sabha. Promote the timely announcement and presentation of agendas prior to the scheduled gram sabha meeting. Members of the gram sabha should be authorised to incorporate particular concerns into the agenda and motivated to engage actively. Establish a dedicated information board at the panchayat office for the gram sabha, detailing registration procedures, various meeting formats, and associated schemes. Create a pamphlet containing information that is easily comprehensible for individuals with limited literacy skills and distribute it to every residence in the block.

- **Surveillance, assessment, and feedback mechanisms**

Efficient monitoring is crucial for assessing the efficacy of proposed solutions and recognising prospective improvements. Due to the collaborative nature of methods aimed at improving Gram Sabha participation, consistent feedback is essential to assess their effectiveness and refine execution. Formative and summative assessments will analyse participation levels, discussion quality, participant representativeness, information-sharing patterns, and the incorporation of public suggestions in planning, execution, and benefit distribution. Data will be

collected via participant observation, informal discussions with stakeholders, direct feedback mechanisms such as community scorecards, and participatory methods like social mapping and diagramming. Efforts and accomplishments in using monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for enhanced community empowerment will be recorded.

Conclusion

Public engagement in Gram Sabhas is markedly inadequate in Tufanganj I Block in Cooch Behar district, West Bengal, although extensive legal measures supporting it. The research delineates the factors contributing to this diminished participation and recommends solutions to mitigate the issues. The deficiency of public engagement in Gram Sabha meetings has emerged as a social and political concern. The participation of the rural population in local administration is heavily emphasised in the rural context of Tufanganj I Block. Numerous social and cultural impediments hinder participation, including illiteracy and individuals' hesitance to engage and participate directly in numerous Gram Sabha matters. There exists a deficiency in awareness regarding the regulations and functions of Gram Sabhas. Information asymmetry and communication hurdles impede local development, as there is a lack of concurrent information flow from rural government service point to villages. Numerous vertical information flow systems exist; nevertheless, direct engagement at the grassroots level is deficient. On the administrative front, restricted resource availability limits Gram Sabha participation in this area. The block has a substantial population already involved in other development blocks, leading to inadequate time for additional outreach efforts. The study proposes a community outreach mechanism conducive to communication, encompassing a detailed outreach strategy for public awareness, effective monitoring and evaluation of Gram Sabha participation, the establishment of diverse participatory groups based on local demographics, gender-specific outreach initiatives, and the engagement of local youth in public mobilisation efforts.

Reference

1. Abiddin NZ, Ibrahim I, Abdul Aziz SA. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their part towards sustainable community development. *Sustainability*. 2022;14(8):4386. doi:10.3390/su14084386.
2. Ananda Gowda N, Shashikumara. Gram Sabha as catalyst for community participation in local governance. *IOSR J Humanit Soc Sci*. 2024;29(12):35-39.
3. Aslam M. Panchayati Raj in India. National Book Trust, 2007.
4. Bandyopadhyay D. The caucus and the masses: West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2003. *Econ Polit Wkly*. 2003;38(46):4825-4827.
5. Clark S. The role that cultural connectedness plays in fostering educational sovereignty for American Indian youths. *J Ethn Cult Stud*. 2022;9(3):168-193. doi:10.29333/ejecs/1102.
6. Datta P. Panchayat, Rural Development and Local Autonomy: The West Bengal Experience. Dasgupta and Co., 2001.
7. Datta P. Decentralisation, Participation and Governance. Kalpaz Publication, 2006.
8. Debnath M. Ecosystem preservation and local governance: The critical role of Gram Sabha and Panchayat in rural sustainability. *Int J Edu Res Technol*. 2025;16(1):35-41.
9. Government of West Bengal. Roadmap for the Panchayats in West Bengal: A Vision Document. Panchayats and Rural Development Department, 2009.
10. Government of West Bengal. Annual Administrative Report, Panchayats and Rural Development Department. Panchayats and Rural Development Department, 2010.
11. Khawas G. The effective role of Gram Sansad in an endowment of villagers' decision: A case study on Rakhakura Village of West Bengal. *IOSR J Humanit Soc Sci*. 2025;30(3):28-36.
12. Madhavrao DS, Khillare SK, Khandare DM. Role of Gram Sabha in rural development planning and decision making. *Int J Manag IT Eng*. 2025;15(10):24-31.
13. Prasad S, Sole NA. Pathalgadi: A critical way to empower the Gram Sabha. *Shodh Sanchar Bull*. 2019;9(36):130-134.
14. Rana U, Sagarika S. Rural development through people's participation in Gram Sabha: A study from Central India. *Glob J Sociol Curr Issues*. 2023;13(2):75-83. doi:10.18844/gjs.v13i2.9112.