



Participation of rural peoples in the planning process - a case study of hailakandi development block of Southern Assam, India

Dr. Pinak Pratim Das 

Faculty Member, DPRC, Udharbond, State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development, Assam, India

Correspondence Author: Dr. Pinak Pratim Das

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Abstract

Introduction: The 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution has given immense power to Panchayati Raj Institution to address various village level economic and social development issues by preparing their plan covering 29 subjects under the 11th schedule of the Indian Constitution in a participatory approach. The state of Assam also adopted the Assam Panchayati Raj Act in the year 1994, and a systematic planning approach has been included in the system through Gaon Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) from the year 2015-16.

Objective: The main objective of the research work is to identify various issues and problems that are faced by the rural people of the selected region to involve themselves in the planning process in rural areas.

Methodology: Total 140 samples were randomly collected from the Hailakandi Development block of Hailakandi District of Southern Assam and the Ordinary Least Square regression model has been used to study the impact of the selected variables on People's Participation.

Results: The study find that there is a significant impact of Sex Ratio, Age, Occupational Structure, Family Income, Knowledge, Skills, Attitude, and most importantly Organizational Defects on Peoples Participation. The most important finding is that People with Skills and Positive Attitude restricts themselves to involve in this holistic planning process due to various types of Organization Defects.

Conclusion: The Panchayat Raj System in Assam needs to improve its governance system at the local level by strengthening the quality of Gaon Sabha and the State or Central Government needs to adopt some policies to address the requirements raised by the local people during the planning process with the help of other departments working at village level with some budgetary support.

Keywords: rural development, peoples participation, participatory planning exercise, panchayati raj institutions, rural governance

1. Introduction

Panchayats have a significant role to play in the effective and efficient implementation of flagship schemes and programs on subjects of National Importance for the transformation of rural India. The 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution 1992 has brought remarkable changes towards the development of rural areas by providing constitutional power to the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The state of Assam has also adopted these changes by adopting the three-tier Panchayati Raj system in 1994 as Assam Panchayati Raj Act. One of the most important amendments of the Assam Panchayat Act is the provision of "Gaon Sabha" which is the foundation of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system. "Gram Sabha" means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of Gaon Panchayat. The Gram Sabha has been designed to be the place where villagers will discuss development issues, plan accordingly, initiate development programs, and select beneficiaries for the schemes. It also promotes unity and harmony among all sections of society in the villages. Through this mechanism, rural people can directly participate in the decision-making process irrespective of caste, class, and gender.

Rural people used to participate in the Gaon Sabha and planning process in the traditional way to address their development needs. But a remarkable change took place when Government introduced Gaon Panchayat Development Plan

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(GPDP) from the year 2015-16 with an aim to promote economic development and social justice in rural governance in a structured way. It has been instructed by the Government that the GPDP process has to be comprehensive and based on a participatory process and involves full convergence with schemes of all related Central Ministries and Line Departments related to 29 subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution.

GPDP is playing some important roles in activating the Panchayats to prepare development plans and thus establish their identity as local Government. Mobilize and motivate people to participate in decision making thereby bringing governance closer to the people. Provide a platform for discussing local perceptions, local issues, and analysis to decide priorities. Access the felt needs and aspirations of people. Identify the magnitude of development gaps. Prioritize the issues and problems existing in the village. Bring all the available schemes and resources through effective convergence. Optimize the utilization of resources in the larger interest of the people of the area. Therefore, GPDP is a comprehensive planning process whose objective is to promote rural development with help of people's participation.

In the Assam context, the process of conducting GPDP activities is very simple and participatory. To conduct this process various committees are required to be formed at the village level to carry forward various tasks by the Panchayat

authorities which involve a huge environment generation campaign at the village level to set up the foundation for the exercise, preparation of activity calendar at Gaon Panchayat level, collection of primary data with the help of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises and secondary data from different line departments, preparation of Draft Status Report (DRS) for each Panchayat. The Draft Status Report needs to be approved by the Gaon Sabha for the preparation of a need-based Perspective Plan and resource-based Annual Action Plan. Then again, another Gaon Sabha is required to take approval for the selected schemes. The process gets completed within two to three months with a participatory approach where rural people prepare their own development plans.

The success of this GPDP process depends on the people's participation. But these people's participation may depend on many other variables some of them are gender, age, income of the households, occupation of the households, knowledge level of the people regarding resources, the skill for conducting these activities, attitude or interest to involve in the process and organizational efforts from the part of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The organizational part also represents the governance level of that Panchayat also.

Various research work has been carried out for decades with respect to people's participation in various matters both nationally and internationally. Amongst them, the work of Aziz (1983) [1] argued that the centralized process of formulating a plan for the development of micro-level areas was inconsistent with the need to take into account local resources, local needs, and local problems. Papola (1983) [11], highlighted that the rural area has different features like geographical, ecological, agro-climatic, and socio-cultural features. Unless development plans for these areas are based on the understanding of their specific problems and characteristics, there is every possibility of their not achieving the desired results. The research work of Pandey (1990) [10] has put more importance is to making rural people self-reliant to a degree that will enable them not only to diagnose their own problems and to solve them but also to have greater control over their own affairs. According to Jain (1994) [6], the lack of adequate machinery for decentralized planning and administration thus continues to be a critical weakness in the existing system. Community Development and Panchayati Raj were aimed at securing people's participation in the planning and execution of the program as a vital aspect of community development Sharma (1970) [13].

Khan *et al.* (1988) [7] find that the strategy of the participative management approach was to share developmental activities among several components of the society like bureaucracy, the people, and their representatives. Different nations named this process differently as 'partnership in development', 'people's participation' and 'community participation etc. In the view of Ray (1983) [12] participation means a self-sustaining mechanism that does not end with the completion of a project. People's participation means the people's initiative to assert themselves with dignity and self-respect. Bava (1984) [3] pointed out that the extent of the participation of citizens depends to a large extent on the image one has of administration. People's participation will be forthcoming if people's image of the administration is positive. Panandiker (1974) [9] stated that due to various reasons like poverty, ignorance, illiteracy, etc. the level of participation in public affairs in developing countries is very less. The desired result

of the development of a democratic political system cannot be achieved without people's participation. Nazneen (2004) [8] found that the participation of the poor and the marginalized in rural development projects has not increased significantly rather some touts and intermediaries have enjoyed more access to those projects and grasped their fruits. Siddiquee (1995) [14] observes that people's participation in the planning and implementation of development projects has been very limited. Based on some literature on people's participation, the main objective of the research work is to identify various issues and problems that are affecting people's participation in the planning process in rural areas which can be addressed on the part of the Government to improve overall performance and governance system of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

No such study has been conducted in this region and on GPDP. So, the GPDP process needs to be strengthened more and more so that people can involve themselves as an important stakeholder in the development process. In the development process, the very first requirement is to prepare a quality plan on the basis of available resources and that can only be possible with the help of people's participation in rural areas. So, this research paper has twofold objectives. First, to construct a peoples participation index for the village peoples of the Hailakandi development block of Hailakandi district, Assam and the second is to identify and examine the key variables which are affecting the people's participation in that study region.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Survey methods and data

To assess the people's participation in rural development planning, the present study area is confined within the administrative jurisdiction of Hailakandi dev. Block of Hailakandi District of Assam, India. Hailakandi District is located in the southern part of the state of Assam. Hailakandi district occupies an area of 1,327 square kilometers (512 square miles). Out of the total area more than 50 percent area is reserved under forests. The district is divided into four revenue circles comprising of 372 villages and 15 forest villages. Out of the remaining half, 33.2 per cent of the area is under cultivation. Paddy is the principal crop. Besides, the district also has 17 tea gardens. The district has 6 Police stations, 4 Police outposts. There are 2 undergraduate degree course colleges and 1098 Lower Primary schools. Hailakandi District is consisting of five Development Blocks. And out of these 5 Development Blocks this study is confined to Hailakandi Development Block only. There are fourteen numbers of Gaon Panchayat under the Hailakandi Development Block of Hailakandi District.

To get the statistically significant sample size, the sample size formulae $n = \frac{z^2 \times \hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{\epsilon^2}$ was used to calculate the sample size for this present study where the population is unknown. Here, 'z' means the z score, and the value of z at a confidence level of 95 percent is 1.96, the margin of error 'ε' is 5%, and population proportion \hat{p} is assumed to be 0.1 that is 10% of the total population because it is witnessed practically that the average participation in Gaon Sabha is approximately 10%. The sample size results come out as 139, accordingly, the sample size for this current research study has been fixed to 140. All the Gaon Panchayats have been chosen purposively.

The number of samples from each Gaon Panchayat was chosen based on the census 2011 population data. The respondent was chosen randomly and interviewed with a set of questionnaires. As per the mandates of the Gaon Sabha, all voters whose age is 18 years and above are members of the Gaon Sabha. So, the respondents whose age is 18 or above were chosen randomly and interviewed with a set of questionnaires. An equal percentage of male and female respondents has been considered during the data collection.

2.2 Formation of Peoples Participation Index

In the context of rural development planning wherein Panchayati Raj Institutions village people are using participatory methods namely Gaon Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) process to evaluate their development needs. In such cases, a new form of participation index is required to understand the various dynamics behind Peoples’s Participation. In the existing literature, it has been found that many research paper has used Bagdi (2002) [2] method to evaluate Peoples’s Participation in the planning, implementation, and monitoring process. In this research paper, the methodology for calculating the Peoples Participation Index needs some modifications based on the objective of the research. As it is seen from the practical facts that in the GPDP process the final authority to approve the development plan is Gaon Sabha but before that to carry forward systematic planning activities are recommended criteria that mean there may be four possibilities in participation which are (a) one may participate in planning exercise but not in Gaon Sabha. (b) One may participate in Gaon Sabha but not in the planning exercise. (c) One may participate in both cases (d) one may not participate in both activities. So, both activities are a significant part of the rural development planning process, especially in the context of GPDP. Therefore, to capture all these aspects the following steps are designed to calculate Peoples Participation Index. Firstly, the respondents have been asked to express the numbers of times they participated in the planning exercise and Gaon Sabha separately. As in India the GPDP process was started for the first time in 2015-16 and the survey year is 2020-21, so the maximum time of participation has been considered as five times and the minimum is Zero times. So, the participation rate in planning exercises for any individuals can be easily evaluated as per the following formula of dimension index formula

$$P_{i(PE)} = \frac{P_{i(APE)} - P_{(Min)}}{P_{Max} - P_{(Min)}} \quad [i = 1, 2, 3 \dots \dots n]$$

Here,
P_{PE} Means participation of any *i*th individuals in planning exercises
P_{i(APE)} Means the number of times *i*th has participated in the planning exercises
P_{Max} Means the maximum possible times one may participate in the planning process.

Secondly, following the same method the participation rate in Gaon Sabha for any individuals can be easily evaluated as per the following dimension index formula

$$P_{i(GS)} = \frac{P_{i(AGS)} - P_{(Min)}}{P_{Max} - P_{(Min)}} \quad [i = 1, 2, 3 \dots \dots n]$$

Here also,
P_{i(GS)} Means participation of any *i*th individuals in Gaon Sabha
P_{i(AGS)} Means the number of times *i*th has participated in the Gaon Sabha
P_{Max} Means the maximum possible times one may participate in the Gaon Sabha.

After getting the results of equations (1) and (2), the People’s Participation Index (PPI) for any individual may be constructed as equation (3):

$$PPI_i = \frac{P_{i(PE)} + P_{i(GS)}}{2} \quad [i = 1, 2, 3 \dots \dots n]$$

2.3 Regression model with variables construction and measurement

Therefore, for estimating various factors responsible for people’s participation in rural development planning, especially in the case of the Gaon Panchayat Development Plan, the linear Ordinary Least Square regression model has been used where the People’s Participation Index (PPI) is considered as a dependent variable and eight socio-economic variables were taken as independent variables. The functional form of the model is

$$PPI_i = f (FSR, A, OCU, FI, KL, SK, ATDU, OD)$$

From the above functional form, the linear regression model may be formed as

$$PPI_i = \alpha + \beta_1(SR) + \beta_2(A) + \beta_3(OCU) + \beta_4(FI) + \beta_5(KL) + \beta_6(SK) + \beta_7(ATDU) + \beta_8(OD) + \mu_i$$

Here,
PPI is the Peoples Participation Index obtained from equation (3) and this is an index value that ranges between 0 to 1 and is considered a dependent variable in this present study. SR is the Sex Ratio and it is the ratio of female members of the respondent’s total household members. The Age of the respondents is denoted by A which is the respondents’ age at the time of the survey. OCU is the primary occupation of the respondents in the context of livelihood. It is a quality independent variable that is expressed in terms of unemployed as 1, day labour or wage earner as 2, farmer as 3, business households as 4, and service households as 5. The Family Income of the respondent’s households is denoted by FI. The respondents have expressed their total monthly income in rupees. These values were converted to a categorical variable like 0 to 5000 as 1, 5001 to 10000 as 2, 10001 to 15000 as 3, 15001 to 20000 as 4, 20001 to 25000 as 5, and above 25001 as 6. The knowledge level of the respondents is denoted by KL. Here, knowledge level refers particularly to the knowledge which is required during the planning process that knowledge of various available resources that ward jurisdiction like numbers of LP schools, ME schools, Anganwadi Centers,

Roads, PHE. Here for the correct responses in each case, one mark was given and zero for otherwise after that all the marks have been added to obtain the total marks then obtain marks has been divided by the maximum marks of five to obtain the value. Skill is another important variable and is denoted by SK. Skills refer to the efficiency level of the various tasks carried out during the planning process. If it is found through the discussion with the respondent that he or she has the efficiency to carry forward all the tasks of the planning process then 1 is given otherwise 0 is given which is a binary variable. In the same way, Attitude is also an important variable that is denoted by ATDU. Here attitude means the positive or negative responses to getting involved in the planning process. It is also a binary variable where positive responses are denoted by 1 and negative responses are denoted by 0. To capture the organizational part relating to the planning process the OD that is Organizational Defects variables is considered in this model. Organizational Defects variables cover the satisfaction of the respondents with respect to setting up proper dates and times for planning exercises and Gaon Sabha, proper functioning of Gaon Sabha, properly addressing their issues and proposals, documentation, etc. by the organizing authority. Where the respondent feels that there exist Organizational Defects 1 is given and where respondents feel that there does not exist Organizational Defects 0 is given.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 5.1: Results of the OLS regression model

Variables	Standardized Coefficients	t-ratio	VIF
Constant (α)	0.394 (.001)***	5.18	
Female Sex Ratio (<i>SR</i>) β_1	-0.066 (.111)	-1.61	1.133
Age (<i>A</i>) β_2	-0.158 (.003)***	-3.07	1.148
Occupation (<i>OCU</i>) β_3	0.335 (.000)***	4.35	1.615
Family Income (<i>FI</i>) β_4	-0.230 (.001)***	-3.26	1.404
Knowledge Level (<i>KL</i>) β_5	0.268 (.000)***	4.39	1.199
Skills (<i>SK</i>) β_6	-0.238 (.000)***	-6.68	1.286
Attitude (<i>ATDU</i>) β_7	-0.154 (.005)**	-2.84	1.077
Organizational Defects (<i>OD</i>) β_8	-0.272 (.000)*	-3.58	1.672
F-Stat	43.28 (.000)***		
Adj R Square	0.66		
Durbin-Watson	2.0		
Number of Observation (N)	140		

Source: Estimation done by the Author based on primary data using SPSS 25 and STATA 16 and presented in table 5.1 accordingly.

Notes: Figures in parentheses are t-statistics, *, ** and *** denotes significant at 10% & 5% and 1% level respectively,

Table 5.1 represents the results of the OLS regression model for this present study. As the dependent variable is the Peoples Participation Index so, it has been seen that the Sex Ratio (*SR*) is a slightly higher level of significance of 11.1 percent with a negative coefficient value of -0.066 that is Female Sex Ratio is negatively related to the people’s participation index. It means that families with higher female members are less represent themselves in the rural development planning process. Age (*A*) is highly significant at a 0.3 percent level of significance with a negative coefficient value of -0.158. Age is also negatively related to the people’s participation index. This implies that as the age of the people increases their participation in planning exercises is going down. Another important variable

Occupation (*OCU*) is also very highly significant at 0.00 level of significance and the coefficient value is 0.335. This means that Occupation is positively related to people’s participation. Here in the case of occupation, we have taken 1 for unemployed, 2 for day labour or wage earners, 3 for farmers, 4 for businessmen, and 5 for service holders. Here the significant finding is that, as we move from unemployed towards serviceman participation increases this also means that the involvement of unemployed, day labours, farmer are not up to the mark in other wards involvement of business class and serviceman are highest and plays a dominant role in participation. Family Income (*FI*) is also a very highly significant variable at a level of significance of 0.1 percent. The coefficient value is -0.230 which means family income is negatively related to people’s participation in other words when the family income increases peoples have less intensity to involve in the planning process. To participate in any planning activity three things are very important without which people may face difficulties to participate and gradually affects the participation rate. Therefore, to capture these important facts three variables have been incorporated into this model these are Knowledge Level (*KL*), Skills (*SK*), and Attitude (*ATDU*). In this analysis, it is found that all these three variables Knowledge Level, Skills, and Attitude are very highly significant with coefficient values 0.268, -0.238 and -0.154 with level significance 0.00, 0.00, and 0.5 respectively. Here the most important thing is that as expected knowledge is positively related to participation which means if the Knowledge level of the rural people increases regarding the availability of the resources around them, information about the various norms, guidelines, provisions, and entitlements of various schemes, etc. will enhance their intensity to participate in the planning process. But the surprising fact is that in the case of Skills and Attitude these variables are negatively related to people’s participation. This means having good skills to conduct planning exercises and also having an interest in getting involved in planning exercises does not ensure people’s participation, however in this case it is negatively related to participation. To understand these dynamics next variable Organizational Defects (*OD*) plays an important role. Here Organizational Defects variable is also highly significant at a 0.00 level of significance with a negative coefficient value of -0.272. It means that if more is Organizational defects to organize any participatory planning process, fewer people will participate in the same process. Here lies the reason for the behaviour of the earlier two variables Skills and Attitude. It has also come out from the discussion with the respondents that although they have some Skills and Positive Attitude to involve themselves in this holistic planning process due to various types of Organization Defects like not setting up proper dates and time for planning exercises and Gaon Sabha, not properly addressing their issues and proposals, absence of proper functioning of Gaon Sabha, documentation etc. This is a very important outcome of this study.

Apart from these independent variables, the constant α is also highly significant at 0.1 level of signification with a coefficient value of 0.349. This means there are some other important variables affecting the dependent variable people participation index which are not considered in this study. The model as a whole is a highly significant model where the value of the F statistic is 43.28 and the level of significance is 0.00. The model

also implies a good fit model as the Adj. R square value is 0.66. The regression model is free from multicollinearity problem where the values of VIF is less than 5. The Durbin-Watson test result is 2.0 which implies no autocorrelation problem and also the standardized value of coefficients implies the absence of heteroscedasticity in this model.

4. Conclusion and Suggestion

From the present study, it can be concluded that in the selected study region female dominating households are participating less which means that women-related problems are not getting proper priority. In this particular case, the government should take the proper initiative to involve more and more women SHG members in the decision-making process by providing some suitable platform for them. The government may also amend the provision for Gaon Sabha in Assam Panchyati Raj Act 1994 by incorporating the mandatory provision of 50 percent women participation in Gaon Sabha to fulfill one of the conditions as quorum criteria. The rural planning needs persons who are associated with the village for a long time and also have knowledge of local culture and sentiments but the lack of participation from older age people is affecting the quality of the plan from the local perspective. Here, both women and old age people are considered vulnerable groups so, awareness is required from the part of the Government to involve more people from these weaker sections. Regarding participation in terms of occupation, we find that the unemployed or poor section peoples are not participating in the planning exercise as they were told that the opportunity cost is very high to participate in the exercise as have to sacrifice their bread earning time to involve in this process. For this fact, the benefits of involvement are taken up by the service and business class people which might create the problem for maintaining social harmony at the village level. For that purpose government may take some alternative arrangements to involve these sections of people by providing some benefits to them. From this paper it is clear that the Panchayat Raj System in Assam needs to improve its governance system at the local level by strengthening the quality of Gaon Sabha and the State or Central Government needs to adopt some policies to address the requirements raised by the local people during the planning process with the help of other departments working at village level with some budgetary support. A lot of awareness is required at the grassroots level to aware people of their rights and ownership development.

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