



GRAM SABHAS AND GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN KARNATAKA: DESIGN, PARTICIPATION AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Article 243A of the Constitution leaves the powers of the gram sabha to state law, and Karnataka has used that freedom to build a layered system of village assemblies. This study draws on the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, 1993, circulars of the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department, reports of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, and field studies by research institutions to assess how far these assemblies deliver grassroots democracy. It finds that Karnataka's legal design and record-keeping are strong, and the state ranks first in the national Devolution Index on accountability measures including gram sabhas. Participation, however, remains low and uneven. Fewer than one in five households attend ward sabhas, wage labourers and female-headed households are least likely to take part, and meetings often record decisions without real discussion. Children's gram sabhas and social audits show what responsive assemblies can achieve. The paper suggests livelihood-sensitive scheduling, published action-taken reports and stronger ward-level mobilisation.

KEYWORDS: Gram sabha; ward sabha; decentralisation; participatory democracy; Panchayati Raj; Karnataka

1. INTRODUCTION

The gram sabha is the meeting of all voters in a village panchayat. It is the main forum in rural local government where ordinary citizens can speak directly to their elected representatives and officials, approve local plans and check how public money is spent. Karnataka, often described as a pioneer of decentralisation, has added ward sabhas, habitation sabhas and children's gram sabhas to this basic design. This paper examines how these village assemblies are meant to work, who actually takes part in them, and what would make them more effective.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992 made the gram sabha, the body of all registered voters in a village, part of India's constitutional design. Article 243A says the gram sabha may exercise such powers as the state legislature provides by law [1]. That leaves a great deal to the states. Across India there are about 2.6 lakh panchayats with 31.5 lakh elected representatives [11], but the gram sabha is the only forum in which citizens take part directly and not through those representatives. Karnataka, with 6,090 gram panchayats [12], is often described as a pioneer of democratic decentralisation [3]. This paper asks three questions: how Karnataka has designed its village assemblies, how they function in practice, and what the evidence suggests for strengthening them. It relies on the state's Panchayat Raj law and departmental circulars, national reports of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, and field studies by research institutions.

2. THE LEGAL DESIGN

Karnataka included the gram sabha in its original Panchayat Raj Act of 1993. At first, sabhas were held for each revenue village, and meetings at the panchayat level tended to leave vulnerable groups under-represented in the forums where key decisions were taken. A state working group on decentralisation set up in 2002 recommended ward sabhas, so that voters of each ward could meet separately before the full gram sabha [3]. After the 2014-15 budget, the government set up an expert committee headed by Ramesh Kumar, a legislator and former Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, to review the system. Its recommendations led to Act 44 of 2015, which renamed the law the Karnataka Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj Act, added habitation sabhas for small settlements, and gave habitation, ward and gram sabhas specific powers to fix development priorities [2].

Both ward sabhas and gram sabhas must meet once in six months. A gram sabha needs a quorum of one-tenth of its members or 100 members, whichever is less, and a ward sabha one-tenth of its voters or 20 members [3]. The law also asks that, as far as possible, at least 30 percent of those attending be women and that Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes be represented in proportion to their population [2]. Alongside these statutory forums, departmental rules and circulars have created others. Table 1 summarises the main village-level assemblies.

Table 1. Village-level assemblies in Karnataka

Forum	Who takes part	Main role	Frequency / note
Habitation sabha	Residents of a habitation or small settlement	Lists local needs and priorities and passes them up to the ward and gram sabha	Added by the 2015 amendment, in force from February 2016 [2]
Ward sabha	Voters of one panchayat ward	Discusses the ward's needs and priorities before the gram sabha meets	Once in six months; quorum one-tenth of voters or 20 [3]

Gram sabha	All voters of the gram panchayat	Approves plans, reviews works and accounts, selects beneficiaries	Once in six months; quorum one-tenth of voters or 100, whichever is less [3]
Social audit gram sabha	Workers and residents	Hears the findings of the audit of MGNREGA works	At least once in six months in each panchayat [8]
Makkala grama sabha	Children of the panchayat	Children raise school, safety and village issues; panchayat reports action	Every November; mandatory since 2015 [13]

3. WHAT THE ASSEMBLIES ARE EXPECTED TO DO

In principle, the gram sabha sits at the centre of local planning and accountability. Under the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), introduced nationally in 2015, plans are to be built from needs raised in habitation, ward and gram sabhas and then approved by the gram sabha [5]. The gram sabha also selects beneficiaries for housing and welfare schemes. It is the forum where social audits are heard: Karnataka's MGNREGA social audit rules of 2011 require at least one social audit in every gram panchayat every six months, with records given to auditors 15 days before the meeting and findings presented to the gram sabha [8]. A separate *jamabandhi* gram sabha reviews panchayat accounts [5].

On national measures, Karnataka scores well. The Devolution Index 2024, prepared by the Indian Institute of Public Administration for the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, ranked Karnataka first overall with a score of 72.23. The state also ranked first on the accountability dimension with 81.33, recording the highest score on the social audit and gram sabha indicators [6].

4. PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

Field evidence gives a less even picture. A study by the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) surveyed 2,232 households in 154 gram panchayats across nine districts in 2017 [3]. Fewer than one in five households had attended a ward sabha, while just over one-third had someone attend a gram sabha. Participation depended strongly on how developed the district was. In the better-performing district, Dakshina Kannada, 57 percent of households attended the gram sabha and 39 percent the ward sabha, compared with 28.7 percent and 14.9 percent in average-performing districts. Households dependent on wage labour and those headed by women were significantly less likely to attend. The study describes this as an "exit" of vulnerable households, which means that the voices of the poorest are least likely to be heard where decisions about them are taken [3].

The quality of discussion also varies. A World Bank study that recorded gram sabhas in four southern states found that Karnataka's meetings had a consistent structure, with officials closely engaged and a good level of public awareness about local programmes. It also found that women who belonged to self-help groups spoke in a more effective way: in Karnataka, 82 percent of them showed a high quality of participation, against 51 percent of all women speakers [4]. Village literacy made a clear difference to the quality of debate [4].

Records do not always reflect real deliberation. A process study of GPDP planning in Udupi district found that minutes, pamphlets and photographs showed ward and gram sabhas being held regularly, but contained no details of the discussion or of votes on decisions. Attendance was low except at the first gram sabha of the year, where most panchayats recorded more than 100 participants. The final plans approved by gram sabhas often listed far more works than the panchayats could afford [5]. Earlier research cited in the ISEC study found that beneficiaries were actually chosen by the gram sabha in only about one-fifth of villages [3].

These patterns match a national study of low participation in gram sabhas carried out by the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj for the Ministry in 2026, covering about 400 gram panchayats in 26 states and union territories. It found that livelihood and time constraints were the largest barrier, cited by 55.5 percent of respondents, followed by weak awareness and communication at 16.2 percent. Migrant households, youth, the elderly and women were among the least represented groups. The study also identified what it called "participation fatigue": repeated meetings without visible results, driven mainly by concerns about transparency (45.5 percent) and the lack of relevance of discussions (42.0 percent) [7].

5. CHILDREN'S GRAM SABHAS

Karnataka's *makkala grama sabhas*, or children's gram sabhas, are one of its most distinctive contributions. They grew out of work with children's councils in Udupi district, where the first children's gram sabhas were held in 2002 [10]. The Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department began children's gram sabhas in 2006 [13], and a 2007 order required panchayats to report back on the action taken on issues raised by children [10]. They became mandatory in 2015 and are held every November [13]. A 2019 circular directs panchayats to hold them in a high school, to give space to school dropouts, disabled children and girls, to record the points children raise, and to upload the proceedings to the Panchatantra portal [9]. Children have used these meetings to press for school toilets, compound walls and drinking water [10][13]. At Hallihole in Udupi district, the panchayat reported in 2007 that 19 programmes had come directly from issues raised by children the year before [10]. Because the agenda is concrete and the panchayat must report back, the children's sabha shows what a responsive assembly looks like.

6. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The evidence points to a gap between Karnataka's strong legal and administrative design and the experience of ordinary villagers. The state holds its meetings, records them and ranks well on national measures. Yet most households do not attend, the poorest are least present, and decisions are often taken before the meeting. The national study's finding of participation fatigue suggests that people stay away when they see little result from attending [7].

Several changes follow from the research. Gram sabhas could be scheduled around agricultural seasons and held in the evening, since loss of a day's wages is the largest barrier [7]. Every gram sabha could begin with an action-taken report on the previous meeting's decisions, as children's gram sabhas already require, and these reports and the minutes could be uploaded to Panchatantra with a summary of the discussion and not only the resolutions [5][9]. Ward sabhas, which are smaller and closer to the household, could be mobilised through self-help groups, since women in these groups already participate more effectively [4]. Finally, gram sabha plans would carry more weight if each meeting were told the panchayat's actual resource envelope before choosing works [5].

7. CONCLUSION

Karnataka has created a wide range of forums for direct participation, from habitation sabhas to children's gram sabhas, and national reviews rank its system highly. Field studies show that these forums are attended mainly by better-off and better-informed households, and that many meetings record decisions without much debate. The design of grassroots democracy in Karnataka is largely in place. Making it work for the wage labourer and the woman-headed household will depend on timing, follow-up and visible results, so that attending a gram sabha becomes worth a day's effort.

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