

IMPACT OF CASTE FACTORS IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN GRAM SABHA IN RAJASTHAN

O. P. Koli*

Abstract

Gram Sabha is the basic unit of development under the Panchayati Raj system. In country like India having hierarchical social system plays an important role in the decision-making process in local governance at grassroots level. The present research paper is an attempt to analyze the impact of caste factors in decision-making process of the development at village level. It is a qualitative-cum-quantitative work based on primary survey in 2011. The analysis of the study reveals that the caste is very rigid phenomena and plays a significant role in decision making process at village level development. Caste factor affect the participation in the Gram Sabha meetings, taking decision on particular issues and initiating development process in a particular area of the Panchayat and taking final shape of development as a whole unit. Moreover, the study indicates that the upper castes has dominantly affects the decision making and development process at village level while lower castes have insignificant role in decision making and development process due to their socio- economic condition, caliber, attitude ,keen interest and liaison etc. It is evident that despite the Panchayati Raj System has firstly introduced in the district of Nagaur in Rajasthan in the country; does not achieve the basic goal of development till date, because caste is still strongest factor affecting development process at individual as well as community level in the rural society of India.

Key words: Caste, Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayat, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Rajasthan.

* **Assistant Professor, University of Delhi, New Delhi**

Introduction

The Gram Sabha refers to the 'general meeting of adult residents within the area of the Panchayat. Gram Sabha is the only unit of local governance in which common people can directly participate in its meetings. Every Panchayat circle must have a Gram Sabha (referred to in Antyodaya circulars as Majma-e-Aam) consisting of all persons of the particular village registered in the electoral rolls. In Indian society which is based on hierarchical social order, where gender, caste, class and religion are major factors in determining over all socio-economic development (Deen, 2014). Customarily Indian society is run by hierarchical structure featuring the social exclusion and inequalities in its caste relations particularly in rural India (Deen, 2015). Thus, the present research paper analyzes the process of decision making at grassroots level by the local people in the socio-economic development of the village. The paper has been divided into three major sections. First section deals with the conceptual discussion of the local governance along with brief discussion of socio-economic profile of the study area. Second section of the study provides a description of legal processes of functioning of local governance at grassroots level. Moreover, it analyzes the impact of caste factors on process of decision making and functioning of Gram Sabha in the selected study area in Rajasthan. The last section provides a discussion on logical ground supported by qualitative interview to show the impact of caste factors in decision making process and implementation of development process in rural India.

Methodology and Study area

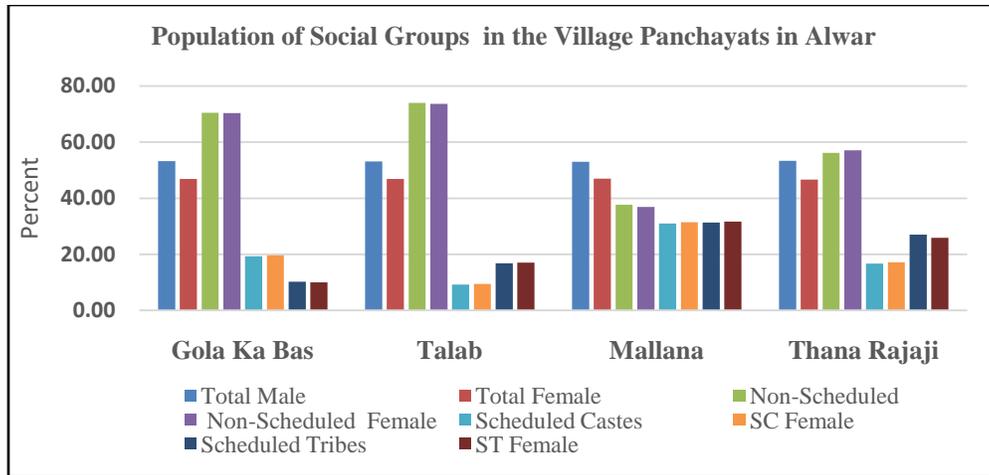
Districts Alwar and Nagaur have been selected for the purpose of the study having consideration of specific characteristics like physical features, socio-economic conditions and cultural aspects from the rest districts of Rajasthan. The purposive sampling has been applied to select the two Panchayat Samitis (Blocks) from two districts i.e. Rajgarh Panchayat Samiti in Alwar district and Kuchaman Panchayat Samiti in Nagaur district. Criteria for inclusion of Panchayat Samitis are: (a) relatively more accessible, (b) closer to the district headquarters. The Village Panchayats namely, Talab, Thana Rajaji, Gola ka Bas, and Mallana have been selected from Rajgarh Panchayat Samiti in Alwar district. Indokha, Meenda, Mundagsoi and Lunwa Village Panchayats have been selected from Kuchaman Panchayat Samiti in Nagaur district. Criteria for selection of Village Panchayats includes: (a) gender equality of village headmans and, (b) representation of

different social groups. Equal numbers of samples have been collected from each social group i.e. Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Non-Scheduled Castes. Primary survey has been conducted based on quantitative and qualitative questionnaire through interviewed with the elected representatives of selected Village Panchayats and households of the villages of the Panchayats in 2011. Total eight Village Panchayats and their wards have been selected for the study purpose and total 200 household samples have been collected from the selected villages for fulfilling the objective of the study.

Social Profile

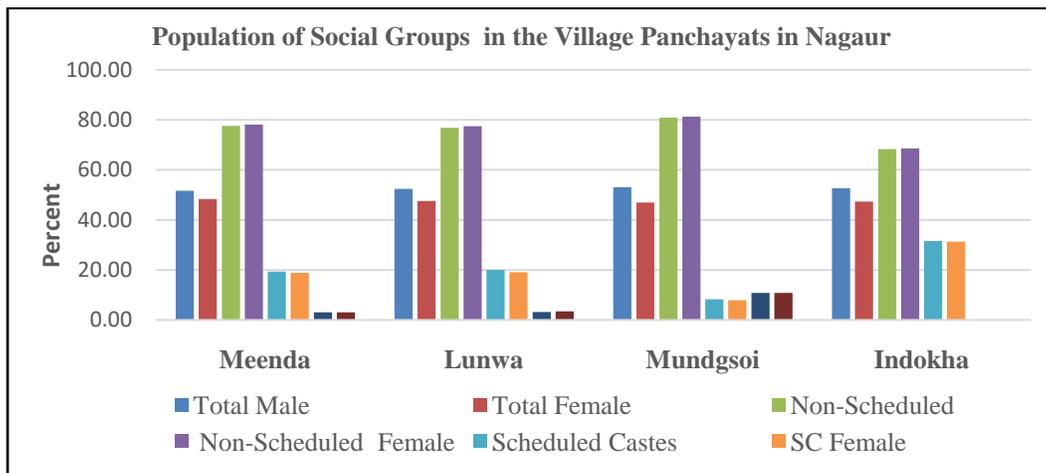
The socio-economic profile of the study area presents an asymmetrical pattern. In the district of Alwar, female population in the village Panchayats is more or less equal in proportion around 47 percent in the entire selected village Panchayats. In Gola Ka Bas Panchayat 19.34 percent population belongs to Scheduled Castes (SC) which is largest among selected four village Panchayats in Alwar district. The Scheduled Tribe (ST) population shares 10.17 percent which is the lowest among selected village Panchayats in Alwar district. The non-scheduled population constitutes largest population with 70.00 percent in this Panchayat. Next selected village Panchayat is Talab comprises 54.00 percent male population along with 46.00 percent female. This village Panchayat has 9.22 percent Scheduled Castes, 17.00 percent Scheduled Tribe and 73.00 percent non-scheduled population. The third village Panchayat is Mallana consists 47.00 percent female population. This Panchayat comprises 31.00 percent Scheduled Tribes, 31.00 percent Scheduled Castes population and 38.00 percent non-scheduled population. The fourth selected village Panchayat in the district of Alwar is Thana Rajaji, constitutes 47 percent female population, 17 percent Scheduled Castes and 27 percent Scheduled Tribes population along with 56 percent non-scheduled population.

Figure No. 1



The district Nagaur is selected for the study purpose because it is the first district in the country where Panchayati Raj System was introduced for the first time in India on 2nd October, 1959. Female population of village Panchayats of Nagaur district is more or less equal in proportion around 48 percent in the entire selected village Panchayats. In the village Panchayat Meenda, females shares 48 percent of the total population. Scheduled Castes constitute 19 percent, Scheduled Tribes 3 percent and non-scheduled Castes shares 79 percent of the total population. The second Village Panchayat Lunwa has 48 percent female population. In the Lunwa Village Panchayat Scheduled Castes shares 20 percent and Scheduled Tribes 3 percent to the total population. Rest of the 77 percent population belongs to non-scheduled population in the Panchayat.

Figure No. 2



The third Village Panchayat Mundgsoi has 47 percent female population, 8 percent Scheduled Castes and 11 percent Scheduled Tribe population along with 82 percent non-scheduled population of the total population. This is the only village Panchayat where Sarpanch belongs to Scheduled Tribes in the whole Nagaur district. The fourth village Panchayat Indokha constitutes 47 percent female, 32 percent Scheduled Castes and 0.1 percent Scheduled Tribe population to the total population of the Panchayat. Non-scheduled population is featuring largest social group in the total population of the Panchayat. Thus, the social profile of the selected village Panchayats reveals that non-scheduled population is the most dominant social group, while Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are marginal section of the society.

Functions of Gram Sabha

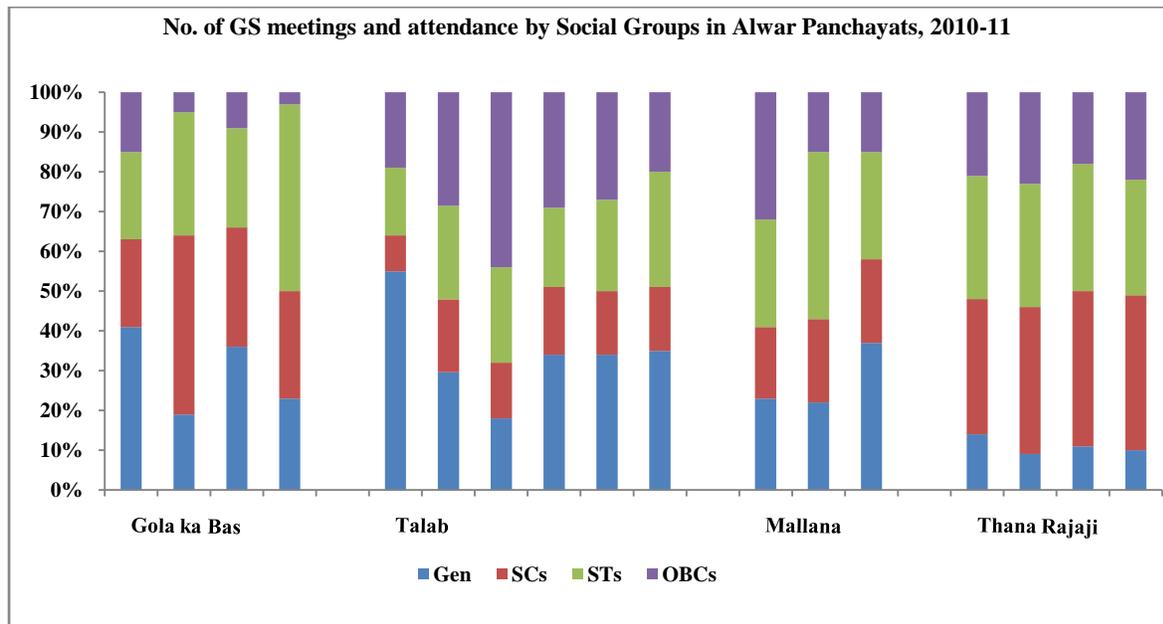
Article 243-A of 73rd Amendment Act provides a Constitutional status to the Gram Sabha under which the rules are permitted to monitoring of Gram Sabha meetings by Panchayat Samiti. In case of failure on the part of Sarpanch or up-Sarpanch to call a meeting, the Panchayat Samiti has to report the matter to the State Government for taking action against the responsible authority for removal and suspension under the section 38 of the 73rd Amendment Act. The incorporation of penal provisions, as above, legally make it possible to enforce more regular meetings of Gram Sabha, which is the main body of the village in terms of grassroot democracy and institutions of self-governance. However, the Act and Rules, while empowering the Gram Sabha to hold regular discussion on the activities of the Panchayat and the programmes being taken up for the welfare and development of the people, have not made it an institution with power of approval and rejection. Narain and Mathur (1967) the Gram Sabha yet to emerge as a forum of constructive criticism of Panchayati Raj Institutions still holds true more than 40 years later (Narain and Mathur, 1967). Thus, in real term, the power of Gram Sabha will continue to depend on the active participation of the people; their taking a keen interest in the business during the meetings and voicing their options forcefully directly or through the Vigilance Committees, as provided under section 8 of the new Act (Hooja and Hooja, 2005). While Section 3(3) and 3 (4) prescribe that the Gram Sabha shall discuss annual statement of accounts, annual administrative report, audit reports and compliance thereto, development programmes, budget, physical and financial activities with reference to the Gram Sabha (Government of India, 2006).

In consonance with, section 3 to 8 of the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act 1994 provides powers and functions for Gram Sabha. The meetings of Gram Sabha have to be called at least four a year to discuss the activities of the Panchayat. A quorum of one tenth of all adult members has been prescribed for its meetings. Provisions have also been made that Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) must be represented in the Gram Sabha meetings in the same proportion of their population in the Panchayat, to achieve the quorum (Government of India, 2008). As per Section 3 of the 1994 Act, at least four Gram Sabha meetings are to be held annually on national festivals. The 1/10th quorum would be necessary for the Gram Sabha meeting along with necessary 1/10th quorum for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other backward Classes (Dube and Pahadia, 2002).

Gram Sabha Meetings

The figure 3 shows that in the district Alwar, Gola ka Bas Gram Panchayat has highest participation by Scheduled Castes (45 percent) in the second meeting and Scheduled Tribes (47 percent) in the fourth meetings followed by non-scheduled participants (41 percent) in first meeting while the lowest participants were from Other Backward Classes 3 percent only in fourth meeting during the year 2010-11. This turnout was because the Sarpanch was elected from Scheduled Tribes community for the first time in the history of the Panchayat. So, the Sarpanch was so excited and invited to all the villagers for participating in the Gram Sabha meetings. As the result of that, a huge number of Scheduled Tribes members were participated in the meetings. In the Gram Sabha meeting, the turnout was 22 percent in spite of being only 10.17 percent Scheduled Tribe population to the total population of the Panchayat. In spite of being 41 percent population of Other Backward Classes, the participation in the Gram Sabha has been reported lowest among all social groups. It is only 03.00 percent in the fourth Gram Sabha meeting. Having high educational and economic status the non-scheduled members turned up in lower percentage in all the four Gram Sabha meetings. It is because Other Backward Classes and General caste have superiority psyche towards SC and ST due to feudal mind set and hierarchical social structure of the village society. On the other hand, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes participation was relatively higher because the Sarpanch belongs to their own community. They support him enthusiastically and also the Sarpanch could mobilize easily the members of SCs and STs communities.

Figure No. 3



In Gram Panchayat Talab, there was six Gram Sabha meetings held during the year of 2010-11. The members of General Caste have participated in largest proportion with 55 percent in the first meeting. The Sarpanch was elected from General caste women candidate. But all the Panchayat activities performed by her husband. Her husband is highly educated, economically strong, holds the power in the village and is more aware about the powers of the Panchayat. Thus, the turnout has been reported higher by the General caste members in the Gram Sabha meetings because of their caste affinity or we can say Sarpanch could enable to mobilize his own community people easily. The SCs, STs and OBCs have participated lower proportion in all the six meetings. It is so that the Sarpanch does not show interest in the issues raised or related to SCs, STs and OBCs and he always make his hegemony in decision making process and shows caste bias in the work priority index. Thus, SC, ST and OBC peoples discard them in the Gram Sabha meetings¹.

In the Mallana Gram Panchayat, only three Gram Sabha meetings were held during 2010-11 year. The highest proportion (47 percent) of participation has been shown by Scheduled Tribes in the 2nd meeting in the Mallana Panchayat because the Meena community (ST) peoples are more dominant in the village. They are highly educated and economically strong. So, they participated actively in the Gram Sabha meetings and also they played significant role in decision making

¹ As narrated by a SC Community member of Talab village (Niraj) May 24th 2011.

process at the Panchayat level. In the first meeting, Other Backward Classes attended in large number (32 percent) because the village headman elected as OBC category after a long time in the Panchayat. So, they have showed support in favor of their own caste village headman.²

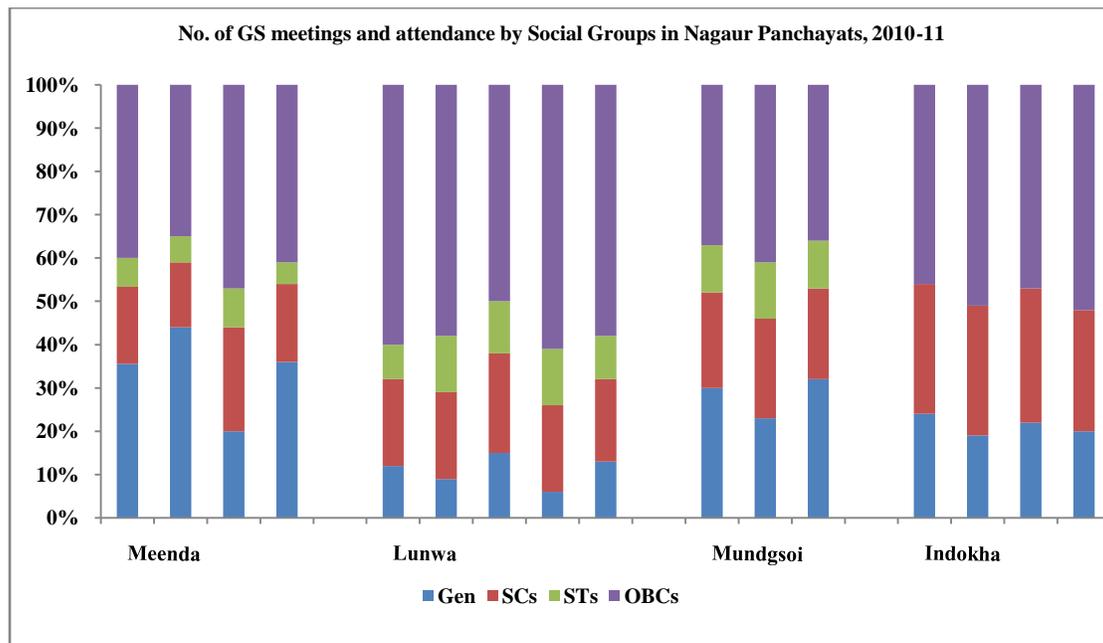
There were four Gram Sabha meetings conducted in the Thana Rajaji Panchayat during 2010-11. The overall attendance by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has been found very high in the all four meetings because the village headman belongs to the Scheduled Castes community. Though OBCs and General Caste population (56.23 percent) shares majority of the population in the village, but their participation has been found very low than SC and ST members in the meetings. These both former social groups are socio-economically stronger, well educated and have Sarpanchship experience than the rest of social groups. Since village headman was belonging to SC community, therefore members of upper caste were not intended to participate in the Gram Sabha meetings because of feudal mentality and caste bias. In the beginning they participate in the Gram Sabha meetings and impose their hegemony on the decisions arguing that they are superior; they hold the power and have more experience. Lower caste Sarpanch should accept their decisions easily. When lower caste Sarpanch doesn't follow them, they boycott the meetings. Moreover, during the Gram Sabha meetings under the chairmanship of a lower caste Sarpanch, lower caste workers serve the snacks to the participants in the meetings. The upper caste people does not accept snacks by the hands of lower caste people because still they believes that snacks become impure by touching a dalit worker, so the upper caste people did not take much interest in these meetings having practice of untouchability.

In Nagaur district, there were four Gram Sabha meetings held in the Village Panchayat Meenda during 2010-11 year. Though, the Sarpanch is elected from SC community that also Women candidate. The attendance in the four Gram Sabha meetings has been made very high by the Other Backward Classes in the Panchayat followed by General and Scheduled Castes people. The lowest participation has been found by the Scheduled Tribes because of low proportion of ST population in the Panchayat. In the Meenda Panchayat, the son of Sarpanch performs all the Panchayat activities on behalf of her. Her son is a school teacher and has good relationship with OBCs people. So, OBC members attended in large number (47.00 percent) in the Gram Sabha

² As narrated by Sarpanch of the Panchayat on March 28th 2011.

meetings. Similar pattern of participants has been observed in the Lunwa Gram Panchayat. The OBC community participated in a huge number in the Gram Sabha meetings because village headman belongs to their own Community. On the other hand, SC and ST population participated relatively lower proportion in respect of their population. In the Gram Sabha meetings of Mundgsoi Panchayat, the participants were significant in number in respect of their social groups. The Sarpanch belongs to ST community. He is illiterate and economically very weak. So, he doesn't take much interest in the affairs of the Panchayat and at very large extent decisions are taken by upper caste people and he just sign on the papers. The Sarpanch have to accept the upper caste people decisions because there is only one family from ST community in the whole Gram Panchayat. If he refuses their decisions, he and his family will be in trouble.

Figure No.4



In the Gram Sabha meetings in Indokha Gram Panchayat, OBC community participation has been found very high in all meetings because OBC population is dominant (68 percent) in the Panchayat. Village headman belongs to upper castes, so OBC and upper castes alliances works very effective in the decision of the Gram Sabha meetings.

Discussion

Usually, rural society in Rajasthan lives on the line of culture and traditions of hierarchical society. In India, lower social groups and women suffered ill effects of socio-cultural practices

prevails particularly in the rural India. Sarpanch of Meenda Gram Panchayat in Nagaur narrated that 'she is illiterate and economically very weak and belongs to Meghawal community (SC) suffers double blow; first one is gender, she is woman, and second is dalit community'. Although she has elected as a Sarpanch but she lives within their own house boundary follows the cultural practice like always live in veil and act according to male members of the family in case of organizing village meeting, and addressing the meeting. All the Panchayats activities are performed by her son on behalf of her. She just signs on the papers. She usually faces several time a casteist remarks by the upper caste members. A dalit woman Sarpanch is useless for upper caste. We the upper castes are not bound to follow the decision done under the chairmanship of a dalit woman. She was our servant in the agriculture field and was dependent on alms given by us³.

After electing as a Sarpanch of the village Panchayat Shyaluta in Alwar, Jai Ram, started facing several kinds of caste atrocities and abusive remark by the upper caste people- "e neech jaat ab Sarpanch ban gaya hai, ab to kisiko samjhega nahi. Isko toh karni chalani chahiye,eh kya Sarpanchayee chalayega". Now a dalit has been elected as Sarpanch, his attitude would be arrogant. He must be do masonry work; he does not deserve to be a Sarpanch.

Another instances can be mentioned here that under the MGNREGS works done by SC Sarpanch, the upper caste people and leaders usually created hurdles and tried to stop the road construction work arguing that these soils/land are the marginal land of my agricultural land, so, you can't dig soil for road because soil from my agricultural land will be flow in these depression and it will harm my crop land. This is because the work is done under the chairmanship of a dalit Sarpanch.

In another case, when the development works have been done by a dalit Sarpanch in the poorly developed area like electrification, drain construction, road construction etc. in the Panchayat, upper caste people tried to stop the work arguing that the work should be done in higher caste area first and if the money will be remain after work is done in these area then it will spend on development work of rest area. Due to this behavior, the development works stopped at all. This

³ As narrated by Mooli Devi, Sarpanch, Meenda, June 25th 2011.

is caste prejudice and intentionally creating hurdles to stop the work, which eventually defame the dalit Sarpanch's image, performance and capability.

In case of SC/ST elected Sarpanch, upper caste people do not cooperate in the Gram Sabha meetings. Upper caste people try to make their hegemony in decision making process and ignore backward community welfare. They give first priority for the development of their own area and then give priority of the rest of the area. Duet to these practices and social psyche, lower caste Sarpanch could not work efficiently and sometimes even he/she can't serve for the development for all section of the society. This is ironical example of caste prejudice which promotes upper caste to create hurdles and problem in development process under the supervision lower caste village headman.

At the time of election, in case of reserve seat for SC/ST, it is also observed that former leader/dominant people propose name of a poor, inefficient, uneducated and suffering from different kind of problems candidates. They support he/she very enthusiastically by giving economic help in the election, when he elected as Sarpanch usually they make his own pet arguing that we have elected you, provided economic help for election, so you must accept my decision and act as we suggest you. In this way, the elected Sarpanch acts as tutelary of upper caste people and easily accept all the decisions accordingly and not make decision independently for the development of the whole Panchayat.

Conclusion

The participation of the villagers in the Gram Sabha meetings has been found varied in nature. It varies from one Panchayat to another Panchayat at the same time. On the other hand, it varies one meeting to another meeting as well. But the overall situation has been found better in the village Panchayats in Alwar district rather than village Panchayats in Nagaur district in terms of participation in the Gram Sabha meetings. If we observe the participation by social group, we found that the higher participation of General category members (55 percent) has been found in Talab village Panchayat in Alwar district while the highest participation has been found by the OBCs (61 percent) in Lunwa village Panchayat in Nagaur district. The participation by the SCs is significant in both Alwar and Nagaur districts. But the participation by the STs has been found

highest (47 percent) in Gola ka Bas village Panchayat in Alwar district whereas STs does not show any participation in Indokha village Panchayat in Nagaur district as the STs population is less than 1 percent in the Panchayat.

The difference in the rate of participation is due to differences in various factors such as caliber, attitude and interest of the Panchayat representatives and the socio-economic conditions of the people in the Panchayat. The conclusion derived from the study is that Gram Sabha will become a reality when only if the people really and actively participate in the affairs of the Panchayat. The mechanism which facilitates community participation in the process of decentralization is the Gram Sabha. So, strengthening and widening the functioning of the Gram Sabha is the best means of ensuring community participation. Only when the people, in their role as Gram Sabha members, participate actively in the development process; will participatory democracy become a reality and the Panchayati Raj will become a system of the people, by the people and for the people.

References

- Deen, S. (2015), “Higher Education among the Scheduled Castes: District Level Analysis Of Uttar Pradesh”, *ACADEMICIA: An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, Vol. 5(7), pp.157-174.
- Deen, S. (2014), “Women in Higher Education: A Spatial-Temporal Analysis of Higher Education from Gender perspective in India”, *Learning Community*, Vol. 5(2&3), pp.173-192.
- Government of Rajasthan (2011), “Economic Review”, The Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Jaipur.
- Government of India (2008), “The Status of Panchayat: An Independent Assessment Report”, Vol.II: States/UTs, Sponsored by Ministry of Panchayati Raj, New Delhi.
- Government of India (2006), “The State of Panchayats: A Mid-Term Review and Appraisal”, Vol.2, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, New Delhi.
- Hooja, Rakesh and Hooja, Meenakshi (2005), “Panchayati Raj: Continuity and Change in Rajasthan”, HCM Rajasthan State Institute of Public Administration, Jaipur.

- Dube, M. P. and Pahadia, Munni (ed.) (2002), “Democratic Decentralization and Panchayati Raj in India”, Anamika Publishers & Distributors Pvt Ltd., New Delhi.
- Narain, Iqbal and Mathur, P.C. (1967), “Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan-a case Study in Jaipur District” Impex India Publication, New Delhi.