

Review

Grassroots Democracy as a School of Citizenship: Political Learning Through Participation

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Abstract: Alexis de Tocqueville said that local institutions are very important for freedom like primary schools are important for learning. When people take part in governance, such as attending public meetings and discussing budgets, they become better citizens and learn how to work with others in a democratic way. This is something that cannot be fully learned in a classroom. The question is, do India's Panchayati Raj institutions, which were established in 1992 to give people control over their local governments, really help people become better citizens and more involved in democracy. To answer this question, we looked at the ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville well as other thinkers like Putnam and Habermas. We also studied information from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, IMPRI and other sources, including the Scribd democracy compilation and the Politics for India analysis of gram sabha as direct democracy. We even looked at research from the All Research Journal and Sage Journals, well as observations from the SOU Democracy Project. We found that Panchayati Raj institutions can be very good at teaching people about democracy. Only if certain conditions are met. For example, people need to be able to discuss and debate issues in gram sabhas, not just be present. Women and marginalized groups need to be heard and have a say in what happens. Local governments need to have enough power and money to make decisions that really matter. If these conditions are not met, then participating in governance can actually make people less interested in democracy because they will see that their participation does not lead to any real change. We made two tables to help understand how this works and what conditions are necessary for Panchayati Raj institutions to really help people learn about democracy. The main point of this paper is that Panchayati Raj institutions have the potential to help people learn about democracy but only if they are done in a way that's genuine and inclusive. Panchayati Raj institutions can be a tool for building stronger, more democratic communities, but only if we make sure that everyone has a voice and that participation is meaningful.

Keywords: Grassroots Democracy, Panchayati Raj, Citizenship; Political Learning, Civic Participation, Gram Sabh, 73rd Amendment, Tocqueville, Social Capital, Deliberative Democracy.

Introduction

There is a simple idea at the heart of participatory democratic theory: that taking part in politics does not just help democracy work it also teaches people how to be better citizens. This idea goes back a way from Aristotle saying that people are meant to live in communities to Rousseau and Tocqueville and J.S. Mill all talking about how important it is for people to be involved in governing themselves. The basic argument is always the same: when people participate in democracy they become better at it.

The Panchayati Raj system in India is a test of this idea. With three million elected representatives, half of them women, in charge of 600,000 villages it is a big deal. They have elections every five years and meetings where every voter can come and have a say. This is like the town meetings that Tocqueville wrote about. On a much bigger scale. The question is, does it work? Are people who take part in Panchayati Raj becoming more interested in politics more involved in their communities and more committed, to democracy?. Does it just look like they are participating, without really changing anything?

The answer is not simple. Sometimes it. Sometimes it does not. It depends on how thingsre set up in each village. Researchers who study Panchayati Raj are starting to figure out what makes it work and what does not.

Literature Review

The idea that people should be involved in making decisions is a part of democracy. A time ago Mill wrote that when people are in charge of their own local communities they learn how to work together and make good decisions. This is still an idea today. Pateman updated this idea. Said that when people participate in democracy they become better citizens and are more interested in what is going on in their community.

Putnam did a study on how different regions in Italy worked together and found that the places that had a lot of community involvement were the most successful. This idea is also important in India, where they have something called Panchayati Raj.

Das recently wrote a book about how Panchayati Raj works in areas. He found that it is complicated and that different communities have to negotiate with each other to get things done. Sometimes local leaders will try to get power and influence the system.. Even with all the problems the system can still work well when people in the community come together and make decisions.

The gram sabha is a part of Indian democracy where everyone in the community can come together and make decisions. This is an idea because it gives everyone a voice.. In reality it does not always work that way. Some people like those from castes or women may not get to say what they think. However when the community is working together and everyone is treated equally the gram sabha can be a way for people to participate in democracy.

For example in some villages the gram sabha is a place where people can come together and discuss issues. This is what Habermas called the "ideal speech situation" where everyone can talk and listen to each other without being forced to do something. The goal is for everyone to work together and come to a decision that works for everyone. This is not always easy. It is an important part of making democracy work.

In India the Panchayati Raj system is a way for people to be involved in their communities and make decisions. It is not perfect. It is a step in the right direction. The gram sabha is a part of this system and can be a powerful tool for people to come together and create positive change.

Panchayati Raj and the gram sabha are parts of Indian democracy. They give people a chance to be involved in their communities and make decisions. This is what democracy is about: people working together to create a better world. The Panchayati Raj system and the gramsabha are not perfect. They are a good start. People like Das and others are working to understand how these systems work and how they can be improved. They are studying how people interact with each other and how they can work together to make decisions. This is work because it can help create a more just and equal society. The Panchayati Raj system and the gram sabha are important for India and for the world. They show that people can come together and make decisions that benefit everyone. This is an idea and it is something that people all over the world can learn from. The Panchayati Raj system and the gram sabha are a part of Indian democracy and they will continue to be important, for many years to come.

Rationale of the Study

Three observations motivate this paper. First, the dominant scholarly debate about Panchayati Raj has focused primarily on its developmental impact — has decentralization improved public service delivery? — while the political learning dimension that the participatory democracy tradition identifies as equally important has received less systematic attention. Second, the question of what participation does to citizens, as distinct

from what citizens do with participation, is particularly important for assessing the long-term democratic quality of India's grassroots experiment — especially given the evidence from other institutional domains that formal participation without genuine authority produces cynicism rather than civic engagement. Third, Bankura University's location within a district characterized by historically significant Left Front mobilization, subsequent TMC consolidation, and BJP insurgency creates an unusually dynamic political learning environment that makes the school of citizenship question particularly worth asking.

Research Questions

1. Through what mechanisms does participation in Panchayati Raj institutions generate political learning and civic competence among rural citizens?
2. Under what institutional conditions does participation in gram sabha and panchayat governance constitute genuine political learning, and when does it produce cynicism or performative compliance?
3. What reforms to Panchayati Raj institutions would strengthen their function as genuine schools of democratic citizenship?

Statement of the Problem

The central problem is institutional capture — the tendency for Panchayati Raj institutions to be captured by local elites (dominant castes, political patrons, male household heads) in ways that produce the formal architecture of participatory democracy without its developmental substance. When gram sabha meetings are attended by poor and marginalized community members who are not genuinely heard, when welfare scheme benefits are channeled through political brokers who take commissions, and when women panchayat members are proxies for their husbands, the participatory institution becomes a legitimation mechanism for existing power relations rather than a challenge to them. This is the failure mode that the school of citizenship argument most fears: that participation in captured institutions teaches not civic competence but civic futility.

Operational Definition

Grassroots democracy in this paper refers to the system of elected local self-government established under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, specifically the three-tier Panchayati Raj structure at gram panchayat, panchayat samiti, and zila parishad levels, together with the gram sabha as the institution of direct democratic deliberation at the village level. Political learning refers to the acquisition of civic

knowledge, political efficacy, deliberative skills, and democratic norms through participation in formal political institutions — the process through which citizens become more competent and committed democratic actors through the experience of self-governance.

Objectives and Hypotheses

1. To map the theoretical mechanisms through which Panchayati Raj participation generates political learning, drawing on Tocquevillean, Millian, Putnamian, and Habermasian frameworks.

2. To assess the empirical evidence on when Panchayati Raj institutions function as genuine schools of citizenship and when they are captured by local elites.

3. To identify the institutional conditions — devolution adequacy, social audit quality, gram sabha deliberativeness, women's genuine authority — that determine which outcome predominates.

4. To propose institutional reforms that strengthen Panchayati Raj's democratic learning function.

Hypothesis H1: Panchayati Raj institutions work really as schools where people learn about being good citizens when three things happen at the same time. First they get money and power to make their own decisions so the people in the local area can really make a difference. Second they make sure that people who do not have a lot of power like the poor and women get a say in what happens in the gram sabha meetings so everyone feels included. Third they are not controlled by powerful people so the decisions people make actually lead to real changes. When Panchayati Raj institutions are controlled by elites it is like a show people participate but the outcome is already decided. This kind of participation makes people lose faith in the system over time than teaching them how to be active and responsible citizens Panchayati Raj institutions end up making people cynical, about the whole thing.

Delimitation of the Study

This paper is about Panchayati Raj institutions. It looks at the gram panchayat and gram sabha levels. The paper does not look at local bodies or block and district panchayat levels. We looked at information from 1993 to 2024. The paper uses information that's available to the public, from other sources and research that has been published about rural Panchayati Raj institutions.

Methods

This study which combines ideas from sources. The main ideas come from people like Mill who wrote in 1861 Pateman who wrote in 1970 Putnam who wrote in 1993 and Habermas who wrote in 1984. Recent studies like the one done by Das in 2022 that was reviewed in Sage Journals in 2024. There are studies too like the one published in All Research Journal in 2024 and the analysis of National Panchayat Awards done by IMPRI in 2023. I also found information on the Politics for India website in 2024 about gram sabha and a collection of information about grassroots democracy on Scribd. The governments Ministry of Panchayati Raj also puts out reports that I used. Additionally the SOU Democracy Project India did some field work in 2024 that I found helpful. My framework, for understanding all this information is based on the school of citizenship theory, which I applied by looking at four conditions that can tell us if a democracy is real or not. Results

Mechanisms of Political Learning Through Panchayati Raj Participation

According to the democratic tradition, participation in governance provides opportunities to learn politics. The main way of learning is through gaining access to information. At the moment people attend gram sabha meetings, they learn about the activities of the government and plans, budget allocation, and priorities. Otherwise, no such opportunities were available. Thus, according to The All Research Journal (2024), the implementation of the 73rd Amendment created mechanisms for information exchange. Even if the gram sabha is far from perfect, it allows informing people. According to IMPRI (2023), award-winning panchayats with high governance skills have better educated people who receive more governmental services.

Another way of learning occurs in the form of empowerment. If people participate in the decision-making process and see its implementation, the feeling of empowerment develops. The feeling, in turn, has an impact on increasing participation in civic processes. Such was Pateman's statement. In practice, this statement holds true for India. Women who took office in panchayats became more interested in politics. Thus, as IndiaSpend shows (in 2025 in Tamil Nadu), women who worked as panchayats representatives expressed the desire to take part in elections and showed confidence in politics. The feeling of empowerment is a real phenomenon. However, it develops only when people have actual power not simulated.

The third way of acquiring political knowledge is in the form of creating social networks. With the development of participation in panchayat governance, people begin

interacting with their peers and government officials. In other words, the process creates ties within society and between citizens and state authorities. In turn, Das (2022) states that the panchayat becomes the place where representatives of various communities interact and cooperate. Though the process is not flawless, the panchayat creates ties that would not appear otherwise.

Finally, the most crucial role in learning plays discussion. Being active participants in debate meetings, people acquire skills of expressing their ideas, listening to others, and reaching agreements. In this way, democracy functions. According to Politics for India (2024), in gram sabha debates all people are equal; thus, everybody should express their opinions and provide reasons for their positions. Moreover, people have to listen to other speakers. Only such processes contribute to educating future citizens. However, the equality mentioned above is rather theoretical since panchayat governance cannot be called completely democratic.

Conditions for Genuine vs Captured Grassroots Democracy

The scholarship identifies three structural conditions that determine whether Panchayati Raj functions as genuine school of citizenship or as a captured legitimation mechanism. The first is devolution adequacy. As the All Research Journal (2024) and Politics for India (2024) both document, the constitutional aspiration of panchayats as institutions of self-government has in practice given way to their reality as developmental implementing agencies for schemes designed and funded by state and central government. When local governance lacks meaningful fiscal and functional autonomy — when panchayats manage budgets dominated by tied grants and implement schemes whose design is fixed from above — participation in panchayat governance does not teach self-governance; it teaches the administration of externally determined programs. The SOU Democracy Project (2024), observing gram panchayat governance in Karnataka, captured precisely this tension: citizens participating in gram sabha discussions on scheme implementation rather than on genuinely local priorities.

The second condition is deliberative inclusiveness. Gram sabha meetings formally include all registered voters, but the political sociology of rural India means that who speaks, who is heard, and whose concerns shape decisions reflects existing power hierarchies unless specific institutional protections and facilitation mechanisms actively counteract them. Women, Dalits, Adivasis, and landless labourers are most likely to be marginalized in gram sabha deliberation. Das's (2022) fieldwork documents that welfare

scheme benefits flow disproportionately to relatives and kinsmen of panchayat members — an elite capture pattern that substitutes patronage for participatory governance. The MGNREGA social audit mechanism, where it functions well, disrupts this capture pattern by creating a public, documented accountability process that the gram sabha can engage with — but as Politics for India (2024) notes, social audit quality varies enormously across states.

The third condition is freedom from patron-client capture. Where panchayat governance is mediated by dalals — the political brokers that Das (2022) documents taking commissions from welfare scheme beneficiaries — participation becomes a transaction rather than a learning experience. Citizens who interact with governance through brokers do not develop direct political competence; they develop the ability to navigate brokered access, which is a very different skill. The distinction matters for the school of citizenship argument because brokered participation does not generate the sense of direct democratic efficacy that Pateman identifies as the core political learning outcome.

Summarization, Recommendations, Implications and Conclusion

Summarization

Panchayati Raj institutions are, in principle, the most ambitious school of democratic citizenship ever constitutionally mandated. Three million elected representatives, direct democracy through gram sabhas, mandatory women's reservation, devolved governance over the full range of rural development subjects — these institutional features create the potential for political learning at a scale Tocqueville could not have imagined. In practice, three structural conditions determine whether this potential is realized: adequate devolution of funds and functions to make local decision-making substantively meaningful; deliberative inclusiveness that ensures marginalized groups are genuinely heard; and freedom from patron-client capture that allows participation to generate direct rather than brokered civic experience.

Recommendations

First, the devolution of the 3Fs – funds, functions, and functionaries – must be speedily accomplished through legally binding state-level acts of devolution, which measure their progress by benchmarking the percentage of state budgets devolved to panchayats based on the recommendations of the 15th Finance Commission. Second, there must be facilitation training for gram sabhas, where the gram panchayat secretary and elected members receive the skills necessary to conduct inclusive discussion, conflict

resolution, and democratic decision-making, paying particular heed to methods for bringing in women's and Dalits' voices beyond simply their presence. Third, social audits must be institutionalized for MGNREGA schemes while expanding to other centrally-sponsored schemes as well, turning participatory accountability into a regular part of rural governance instead of a scheme-specific practice. Fourth, there must be measures taken to resolve the problem of intermediaries or brokers through citizen information campaigns about scheme entitlements, which will make these accessible without depending upon the assistance of such brokers – grievance websites available in vernacular languages at CSCs.

Implications and Conclusion

The idea that democracy learns itself — that the practice of self-governance is the best preparation for more self-governance — is among the oldest and most empirically supported insights of democratic theory. India's Panchayati Raj experiment has produced genuine democratic learning for millions of citizens, particularly women, whose first encounter with formal political authority has expanded their political horizons and their communities' expectations of women's leadership. That this learning is uneven, conditional, and in some villages actively undermined by elite capture is not an argument against the experiment but an argument for the institutional reforms that would let it fulfill its constitutional promise. Tocqueville's townships did not produce perfectly deliberative democracy either. They produced citizens who were more politically capable than they would otherwise have been — and that, given the scale of India's democratic project, is worth pursuing with determination.

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