

Popular Participation in Primary Education in Rural Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh

V. Anil Kumar*

Broader participation of local communities in educational governance processes is not only a laudable virtue in itself, but it is also a necessary prerequisite for equitable and just outcomes. This article shows how a broader participation matters, taking the example of primary education in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The article argues that the absence of local participation leads to phenomena such as 'elite capture', unjust distributional outcomes and also not so efficient fulfillment of the expected developmental goals. The paper illustrates this point taking a comparative picture of SDMCs in Karnataka, and SECs during the Telugu Desham Party regime in Andhra Pradesh.

Introduction

In the 1980s and the 90s, participation became an increasingly fashionable concept. From the small local NGOs situated in Taluk or District towns to the World Bank in Washington DC, all began to speak increasingly in the language of participation. The governments and bureaucrats, in between, have fallen in line and have started couching their own policy-rhetoric in terms of the participation of the marginalized in the implementation of schemes meant for them. The participation of the marginalized in, and to some extent the

* Assistant Professor, Centre for Decentralisation and Development, Institute for Social and Economic Change, VKRV Rao Lane, Nagarabhavi, Bangalore - 560 072

ownership of the marginalized of the programmes that are meant to alleviate their situation, has been increasingly seen as a necessary prerequisite (Borda, 1998). Participation was seen as necessary for development and empowerment both by the NGOs and governments. Of late, however, the backlash to this has become fashionable too (Cleaver, 1999). Now it is fashionable to critique the concept of participation without necessarily bothering about the consequences of denuding the notion. In this article we intend to argue that such capitulation to new critical fashions against participation hurts the poor and the marginalized most. There are, indeed, certain critiques of participation that concentrate on the assimilation of participation into the neo-liberal discourse on development. These critiques are not against participation *per se*, but are more about the incorporation of the notion of participation in the neo-liberal discourse which sees participation more in terms of techniques and methods of participation that help promote neo-liberal agenda. We argue here that the significance of participation is more so in countries such as India where the notion of participation has the potentialities of questioning the old hierarchies of the commonly inherited past, such as caste and gender inequalities, and the new and increasingly entrenching hierarchies of class and its related inequalities—both of which impinge negatively on the voice and agency of the marginalized. Participation in itself does not depoliticize the development process; on the contrary, participation, and insistence on participation, themselves potentially are political projects. We intend to illustrate this point taking the case study of primary education in two south Indian states: Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The inclusion of the poor and the marginalized in the development processes, and decisions that affect their lives, appear to be of utmost importance.

In the following, we elaborate the above taking the case of participation of local communities in primary education in Karnataka

and Andhra Pradesh wherein specific 'CBOs' (Community Based Organizations) have been constituted to look after the primary education facilities. This happened in terms of SDMCs (School Development and Monitoring Committees) at present in the case of Karnataka and SECs (School Education Committees) during the Chandra Babu Naidu regime in Andhra Pradesh. The Karnataka part of discussion is based on the field work in two districts: Bidar and Chamaraja Nagar. The former is the northern most district of the State and the latter, the southern most. The Andhra Pradesh discussion is based on our earlier study of SECs in the Mahabubnagar district of Andhra Pradesh. The study was conducted with qualitative methodologies and therefore we cannot present the numbers but share here the study findings and insights from the wider observations in Andhra Pradesh.

In both the cases, the lack of broader participation of the village communities has failed to lead to the desired outcomes. The functioning of primary education with the help of these bodies had not certainly improved the much-talked-about 'ownership' of primary education by the local village communities. This paper argues that in the final analysis, the option for the rural poor is not 'choosing not' to participate, but rather 'to choose (to participate) or to lose (out)' as far as the developmental and governance functions such as primary education are concerned.

Primary Education and SDMCs in Karnataka

The primary education in Karnataka is supposed to be monitored by the School Development and Monitoring Committees: SDMCs. Every primary school is supposed to be monitored by one SDMC. An SDMC is a nine-member committee with a chairman, a vice-chairman and, ideally, three women members and one person each from the SC, ST community and minority communities. The Head Master of the school is also a member of the SDMC. All of them, excepting the Head Master, should be parents of the wards in school.

and Andhra Pradesh wherein specific 'CBOs' (Community Based Organizations) have been constituted to look after the primary education facilities. This happened in terms of SDMCs (School Development and Monitoring Committees) at present in the case of Karnataka and SECs (School Education Committees) during the Chandra Babu Naidu regime in Andhra Pradesh. The Karnataka part of discussion is based on the field work in two districts: Bidar and Chamaraja Nagar. The former is the northern most district of the State and the latter, the southern most. The Andhra Pradesh discussion is based on our earlier study of SECs in the Mahabubnagar district of Andhra Pradesh. The study was conducted with qualitative methodologies and therefore we cannot present the numbers but share here the study findings and insights from the wider observations in Andhra Pradesh.

In both the cases, the lack of broader participation of the village communities has failed to lead to the desired outcomes. The functioning of primary education with the help of these bodies had not certainly improved the much-talked-about 'ownership' of primary education by the local village communities. This paper argues that in the final analysis, the option for the rural poor is not 'choosing not' to participate, but rather 'to choose (to participate) or to lose (out)' as far as the developmental and governance functions such as primary education are concerned.

Primary Education and SDMCs in Karnataka

The primary education in Karnataka is supposed to be monitored by the School Development and Monitoring Committees: SDMCs. Every primary school is supposed to be monitored by one SDMC. An SDMC is a nine-member committee with a chairman, a vice-chairman and, ideally, three women members and one person each from the SC, ST community and minority communities. The Head Master of the school is also a member of the SDMC. All of them, excepting the Head Master, should be parents of the wards in school.

The purpose of the SDMC is to monitor school development and its every day functioning, such as student attendance, retention, teacher attendance and the functioning of the 'Bisi Oota' (hot meal) or mid-day meal programme. While the aims set up for the functioning of SDMCs is praise-worthy with an intention to drawing the participation of the local communities into the management of primary schools, the reality is different. The SDMCs are not participatorily elected bodies but are formed out of the parents of the school children who are picked or nominated by the local MLA. These belong to the party of the local MLA. Thus, the SDMC is often the party cadre of the local MLA. And by that token are highly politicized bodies. It is not a process of the local parent community choosing from among the parents, representatives to monitor the functioning of the local primary school, but the local MLA, nurturing his constituency by politically employing the local cadre in the form of SDMC members.

The SDMCs at present also get funds from the State government and are involved in the execution of civil works needed for schools. These include construction of additional class rooms, drinking water facility and construction of toilets, etc. According to the officials of the education department, the upper limit of funds allocated to each school for performing such tasks is around Rupees three lakhs, depending upon the necessity of the school.

There is no connection between the Gram Panchayat (GP) and the SDMCs. Sometimes the GP members also happen to be the members of the local SDMC, though entirely out of chance and coincidence. This makes the SDMC accountable upwardly only to the MLA and the education department officials and not downward to the local village community or the Gram Panchayat.² A wider participation of either the Gram Panchayat or the local village community in the decisions taken is non-existent in both the design and functioning of the SDMCs. In such absence of the participation of local communities could SDMCs function effectively?

Our visits to the villages in the two districts of the State of Karnataka, Bidar and Chamaraja Nagar, show that the SDMCs function in a far from satisfactory manner. Since they are bodies constituted by the men/women hand-picked by the local MLA, they fail to be bodies that take decisions on the basis of a wider consensus in the village. The local villagers, who happen to belong to the party opposed to the local MLA, tend to be critical of the functioning of the SDMC. The result is conflict and acrimony. If the local SDMC members happen to be powerful, the villagers belonging to the opposition party keep quiet during group discussions and avoid raising questions concerning the SDMCs.

The group discussions conducted in the villages demonstrate that SDMCs happen to be contested political bodies. The internal politics of the village nullifies the functioning of the SDMCs. In one case, in a village called Ailapur in Bidar a court case is on in the High Court of the Karnataka regarding the constitution and functioning of the local SDMC. In both Bidar and Chamaraja Nagar, only around fifty percent of the SDMCs are at present in functioning status. The Table below indicates this.

Table-1
Functioning of SDMCs in Bidar and
Chamaraja Nagar Districts, Karnataka

District	Working (No. of SDMCs)	Not Working (No. of SDMCs)	Total
Bidar	20	16	36
Chamaraja Nagar	27	8	35
Total	47	24	71

Source: Primary Survey by the Centre for Decentralisation and Development team at the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.

Now with the allocation of larger sums of money for the primary schools made available through SDMCs, the problems are further complicated. The money meant for school development—particularly, for construction works—is kept in a joint account of the Head Master of the School and the Chairman of the local SDMC. The complaint of the District and Taluk level education department officials is that the implementation of these civil and construction works by the SDMCs is poor. The Chairmen of the SDMCs force the local Head Master to sign cheques even for work poorly done. These bodies are not accountable either to the local village community or to the local Panchayat. They are only accountable to the local MLA, and the officials of the education department, both of whom they ‘manage’ with the help of political linkages. Meanwhile, the local village community becomes divided over the issues of school development and monitoring. This was apparent during the group discussions that we conducted in the villages; whenever we tried to broach the issues related to the SDMCs, half of the participants of the group would either keep silent or walk away from the meetings and they would return to the group discussion, when other topics are discussed. This we witnessed in Bidar and Chamaraja Nagar.

The major question is that of the participation of the local communities in managing the affairs concerning their lives and the lives of their progeny. The bodies such as SDMCs, which are constituted in top-down fashion, dilute the term local self-government and do not really engage local communities in the development and functioning of the critical areas of village level human development such as primary education. Questions here belong to both citizen participation and the accountability of decision-makers to the ordinary citizens (for further discussion on participation and accountability in the Karnataka context see: Crook and Manor, 1998).

Primary Education and SECs in Andhra Pradesh³

Andhra Pradesh has a longer history of creating 'CBO's (Community Based Organizations) than Karnataka. In Andhra Pradesh, the CBOs or 'user groups' were initiated first during the rule of the Telugu Desham government in the mid-nineties (Jayalakshmi, 2001). The specific user group or CBO created in the context of primary education was the School Education Committees or SECs. These are also known as 'Parents and Teachers' Committees'. These were created by a Statute and it clearly bypasses the control that Panchayats at Zilla Parishad level had on the schools. The SECs in Andhra Pradesh, unlike SDMCs in Karnataka, were elected bodies. The electorate consisted of the parents of the pupils of the concerned school. The design of the SEC was also different in the sense that the members of SEC were not only elected but there were also reservations for women and SC & ST parents in the committee. So far as the design goes, it appeared fair enough that the parents of the children studying in the school happen to be most concerned about the condition and working of the school, and that therefore they choose the SEC. In addition to that, the reservation mechanism being in place, the marginalized sections could automatically control the school-functioning to the benefit of the education of their children. Some supporters of the idea of SECs even argued that since it is most often the marginalized sections who send their children to government schools, it is appropriate that they control the resources and functioning of the school. It was suggested that in Andhra Pradesh most villages also have private schools and the elite of the village send their children to them rather than to government schools. Therefore it does not cause any problems if the SECs are formed for government schools; and it would help the marginalized sections take better care of the education of their children. This discussion in Andhra Pradesh rarely asked the question whether the local-self-governments i.e., the Gram

Panchayats should have any say in the functioning of the school. For namesake the Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat was also made the member of the SEC but the interaction between SEC and Panchayat has never taken place. The actual powers over primary education were shifted from the Zilla Parishad to the line-department of the Education Department. The DEO (the District Education Officer), had all the powers over the schools. Whatever powers the Zilla Parishad Chief Executive Officer and the elected President of the Zilla Parishad had were divested from them and were given to the bureaucracy of the Education Department.

The findings of our study conducted in Mahabubnagar district, Khila Ghanpur Mandal and four villages namely Salkilapur, Mamidimada, Appareddypalle and Allamayapalle showed us the following results:

- Gram Panchayats are primarily looking after the provision and maintenance of street lights, sanitation and drinking water facility, land and playground to the schools.
- Gram Panchayats do not have control or any authority regarding primary education. School Education Committees have taken over that function.
- Primary Education is devolved to Panchayati Raj Institutions vide G.O.M. 120 dated 31-3-1999. While the Gazette says that 'Education including primary and secondary schools' is devolved, the G.O. reads differently. The G.O. does not mention primary or secondary education specifically in its text.
- The G.O.M.S. 538 passed subsequently takes away whatever control there was with the Chief Executive Officer of Zilla Parishad and vests all the powers with the bureaucracy, i.e., the District Education Officer.
- At the Mandal level, the Mandal Education Officer, rather than the Mandal Parishad or Mandal Panchayat, has all the powers to look after the primary and secondary education.

- As far as the Gram Panchayats are concerned their work vis-à-vis primary and secondary education is reduced entirely to voluntary effort.
- The working relationship between SECs and Gram Panchayats is not conducive to the strengthening of Primary formal education.
- Sarpanches feel that after the introduction of the SECs their role is lessened or that they have no role to play in school-functioning. Devolution of primary and secondary education to Panchayats is only on paper and has not made any difference to them.
- Panchayats do not have any role in the recruitment, posting of teachers, transfers, disciplinary action, salary disbursement, training of teachers etc. Every power is vested in the state education department and at the district level with the District Education Officer, at the Mandal level with the Mandal Education Officer and the village level with the School Education Committee.

In addition to the above, the Panchayats, which, according to the 11th Schedule of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, are supposed to take care of the local schools, have given up on the schooling system. Problem arose when the DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) with the support taken from DFID of the UK government, started funding the SECs in a major way. Funds flowed for civil and construction works, mid-day meals and for the other supportive activities for the schools. It appeared it was all very well even if the Panchayats were not involved. But the problems arose firstly, with the elections to the SECs, secondly, with the reservation for women and marginalized sections within the SECs. The third major problem was the larger dispensation of the regime at the State level whose interests, as it became clear increasingly, in creating such CBOs was not just to make the functioning of the schools better,

but also to weaken the hold of Panchayats on the major aspects of their functioning. The SEC was one of the many 'parallel bodies' to Panchayats floated at the village level. This would not have been a major issue if SECs were formed and they functioned as per the stipulations meant for them. In practice, elections to the SECs became similar to any other elections where liquor and money flowed during the Election Day. Secondly, the reservation to the membership for SEC only became nominal often with the local upper caste men running the SEC and in the case of women SEC presidents it was invariably the husband or some other male relative who participated in the functioning and decision-making process of the SEC. Therefore, given the larger society, the economy and the regime-interests at the time, i.e., the polity at the State level, creating CBOs or user groups did not substantially deliver on the front of primary education.

What interests us is the question of larger democratic institutions, the achievement of positive development goals through the participatory functioning of these institutions. It may be held without much dispute that the functioning and deepening of democracy at the grass-roots level takes place only when the Panchayats are given the mandate to take care of these development goals and then their achievements are assessed in the form of equity, justice and efficiency. Panchayats learn to achieve them only when given an opportunity, not when these functions are taken away from them. Politics of the village would be part of the whole development process. As long as we call ourselves democracy and as long as the marginalized sections make increasing demands on the democratic polity, the development policies and implementation can only become politicized (Leftwich, 1996).

Gram Panchayats, Missing Participation and its Consequences

It remains a problem as to what relation can be posited between

Gram Panchayats and primary education. Certainly, as we have seen above, both SIDMCs in Karnataka and SECs in Andhra Pradesh have not succeeded much in producing great benefits for the schools. Schooling as an area should be the concern of all the citizens of the local government and not limited to a specific user group. According to the noble intentions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and as per the respective State Panchayat Acts, primary schooling is a responsibility of the Panchayats and particularly Gram Panchayats at local, village level. To divest them of this responsibility is Constitutionally incorrect. The larger concern for local schools should be generated in the entire community and Gram Panchayat should be given a leading role in the development and monitoring of the school. If Panchayat institutions falter in delivering their already existing nominal duties, the answer to this is not taking away powers, resources and functions and functionaries from them, but on the contrary, placing the responsibility squarely on their shoulders and expecting them to deliver. Panchayats, all said and done, have to be the third tier of governance in the country along with the State and Central Governments. It is high time that the governments at the State level and the bureaucrats realize this. What surprises us is that this situation prevails even in Karnataka with an active public consciousness about rural development and Panchayati Raj and a history of progressive legislation and policies regarding Panchayati Raj for a long time. In Andhra Pradesh, the regime change in 2004 has led to the abolition of School Education Committees.

What we intend to argue, taking the example of primary education both in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, is that firstly, local self-government institutions should be seen as genuine local government institutions by the State governments and their bureaucracy. Second is the major question of participation. The village education should be a concern for the whole of the village community, both the parents and non-parents. The schools and their functioning should be the

main agenda in Gram Panchayat meetings that are supposed to be held every month and the Grama Sabhas that are supposed to be held at least twice a year in both the states. Schools, it is held here, should be the *focus of discussion of the entire village communities*, with all their internal cleavages. If broader participation is not ensured and if the local members of the community 'choose not to participate' they will lose out on the questions of equity of treatment of children in the school, justice in providing school amenities and education to children of all the communities, and in the efficiency in the delivery of education by the schoolteachers. On all these counts, the larger participation of the community through the Grama Panchayat is necessary. If not, MLAs decide what funds and resources and functioning goes into schooling in Karnataka; and Party bosses decide what should happen to school resources in Andhra Pradesh. Schools in the villages are not meant for serving the political interests of bosses who operate from State capitals but impart quality education to the poorest students for whom effective schooling is the only means of social and economic mobility in the times of 'service sector boom' and 'jobless growth': both happening in a 'knowledge economy' whose opportunities, the better schooled children of urban middle classes are so eager to corner.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The conclusion and policy implications of what we have discussed above do not limit themselves to primary education but are applicable to all rural development programmes and rural governance schemes; the example of SDMCs being the handmaidens of the local MLAs point to the 'elite capture' phenomenon of school education in Karnataka. The Andhra Pradesh example of SECs shows how the political bosses at local and regional levels manage these institutions to their advantage. Particularly male dominance in both SDMCs and SECs where the supposed women members do not form part of effective voice in these institutions is another example of how local

power equations matter in supposedly 'non-political' institutions (on New Public Management solutions to decentralisation and its critique see: Elcock and Minogue, 2001). Active participation of these members makes a thorough case for an inclusive and pro-poor orientation of rural development and governance. This particularly holds true in an age, which extols itself as 'knowledge era', and 'information age'.

As political scientists increasingly remind us (Mehta, 2003), there is a decline of traditional social orders and arrangements in rural areas and new collective identities are fast emerging and these groups, be they of backward classes or Dalits or numerous Ambedkar Youth Groups or local women through their ubiquitous Self Help Groups; all these have to be taken into account and involved in the development and governance processes. Participation and demands for popular participation are growing and these need to be accommodated in local democratic decision making systems (Wignaraja, 2004 and also Vyasulu, 2003). Given the larger realities of the political economy of development, and the emerging scenarios of 'knowledge economies' and 'information ages,' there is need for active and broader participation of the local people in the development processes.⁴

Notes

1. I thank Dr. Moushumi Basu and Dr. Ajit Menon for drawing attention to this and other critiques of participation.
2. A senior Indian Administrative Service official of Karnataka said that the guidelines issued from the State government prevent MLAs from controlling the SDMCs. But field work in Bidar and Chamara Nagar showed us that the guidelines were not yet implemented. Talking about the SDMCs, the Deputy Commissioner of the Bidar district clearly said that they need urgently to be depoliticized; meaning thereby that the MLAs' control over the SDMCs should stop. His own suggestion was quite interesting. He said that the parents of the

toppers of the school should be made the members of the SDMC, along with others.

3. This section is based on our earlier study conducted in Andhra Pradesh regarding Panchayats and Primary education. The then Chief Minister Chandra Babu Naidu's regime was, along with dynamic policies of attracting foreign funds, also promoting parallel bodies to Panchayats and to down-playing the Panchayat system in general. While the Karnataka part of the paper included a quantitative survey, the Andhra Pradesh part of the paper was done through qualitative methodologies, using interview, focus group discussion and case study methodologies and did not involve a survey, thus making us unable to provide figures.
4. Both the States discussed here are known for their very progressive policies of promoting Information and Communication technologies. Both the states are also, irrespective of governments in power, known for their software exports and booming software sectors and these are also actively, and perhaps quite rightly, encouraged by the governments. In this context there is a point in reminding ourselves of the contrast between the policy of software-led development, which is largely urban (at least so far), and the policies concerning the governance and development of the rural areas; more particularly regarding education in general and primary education in particular.

References

- Bezanson, Keith, 2004. "Rethinking Development: The Challenge for International Development Organisations" in *IDS Bulletin: Institute of Development Studies*, 35(3), pp127-134.
- Borda, Orlando Fals (Compiled and Analyzed). 1998. *People's Participation: Challenges Ahead*, New York: The Apex Press and London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Cleaver, Frances, 1999. 'Paradoxes of Participation: Questioning Participatory Approaches to Development', *Journal of International Development*, Vol. 11,597-612.
- Crook, Richard C. and James Manor. 1998. *Democracy and Decentralisation in South Asia and West Africa: Participation, Accountability and Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Elcock, Howard and Martin Minogue. 2001. 'Local Government: Management or Politics?' in Mc Court, Wily and Martin Minogue (Eds) *The Internationalization of Public Management: Reinventing the Third World State*. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton MA, USA: Edward Elgar, pp.90-106.
- Jayalakshmi K. 2001. 'Panchayat Institutions in Andhra Pradesh: Issues and Interventions' Paper for the South Zone Conference on "Panchayati Raj Institutions" held during December 28-29, 2001, Kadi Kubel Institute of Development Education, Coimbatore and Centre for Panchayati Raj, Hyderabad: National Institute of Rural Development.
- Jha S.N and P.C. Mathur. 1999. *Decentralization and Local Politics*. New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London: Sage Publications.
- Leftwich, Adrian (ed). 1996. *Democracy and Development: Theory and Practice*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Leftwich, Adrian, 1996. 'On the Primacy of Politics in Development' in Adrian Leftwich(eds), *Democracy and Development: Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp.1-23.
- Mehta, Pratap Bhanu. 2003. *The Burden of Democracy*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- National Council of Applied Economic Research. 2001. *South India Human Development Report*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Schneider, Hartmut 1999. 'Participatory Governance for Poverty Reduction', *Journal of International Development*, Vol. 11, pp.521-534.
- Vaddaraju, Anil Kumar, Cheruku Venkatesham and Kodali Savitha 2002. 'Primary Formal Education and Panchayats-Experience of Andhra Pradesh'. *Participation and Governance* in 8 (25), pp.28-30.
- Vaddaraju, Anil Kumar, Cheruku Venkatesham and Kodali Savitha. 2001. *A Study on Primary (Formal) Education and Panchayats: Devolution in Primary Education: AP Report* (Unpublished Study Report) Hyderabad: Participatory Research in Asia(mimeo).
- Vyasulu, Vinod. 2003. *Panchayats, Democracy and Development*. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat.
- Wallerstein, I. 1996. *Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences*. New Delhi: Vistaar.
- Wignaraja, Ponna (Ed). 2004. *Pro-Poor Growth and Governance in South Asia: Decentralization and Participatory Development*. New Delhi: Sage.