



# From Participation to Performance: Examining the Role of Village Education Committees in Improving School Education in Ladakh

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## Background

Village Education Committees (VECs) emerged as grassroots mechanisms to foster decentralised governance in rural India's elementary education landscape. Their inception under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and institutionalisation through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) aimed to enhance quality, inclusivity, and accountability by anchoring educational decisions within local communities (Menon, 1999). These committees sought to unify a wide range of stakeholders—parents, teachers, and community leaders—to support micro-planning, boost enrolment and retention, promote girls' education, and facilitate school-level monitoring and resource management (ERU, 2013; Daily Excelsior, 2015). In essence, VECs served not only as facilitators of school development but also as conduits for community engagement and advocacy for formal education, particularly among marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

The institutional framework of VECs mandates inclusive representation, with at least 50% of the members being women and mandatory inclusion of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalised communities, reinforcing the objective of equitable governance and participatory decision-making (Menon, 1999; Nouskit & Rajput, 2021). This structural inclusivity has yielded notable outcomes, particularly in enhancing enrolment among early primary students and girls. However, the functional efficacy of VECs often correlates with the educational qualifications of their members. Committees with members possessing secondary education or higher have demonstrated greater

activity and effectiveness, whereas others with predominantly illiterate members have faced challenges in participation and leadership (Tripathi & Bajpai, 2012).

Despite their foundational role in the decentralised educational framework, the practical implementation of VECs has been uneven. Studies revealed that in many areas, governance remains centralised, roles of VEC members are ambiguously defined, and there is limited genuine grassroots engagement in decision-making (ERU, 2013). These inconsistencies underscore the disconnect between policy intentions and ground-level implementation, as reflected in ongoing issues related to school maintenance, effective policy execution, and the limited inclusion of the most marginalised communities (Mishra & Gartia, 2013). Despite these challenges, VEC members remain actively engaged in school affairs—monitoring teacher attendance, assessing the use of pedagogical methods introduced during training, and overseeing student learning outcomes—indicating their untapped potential to drive meaningful educational reform (Wankhedea & Sengupta, 2025).

Furthermore, the role of VECs in drafting localised school improvement plans, overseeing infrastructure grants, and encouraging community-level dialogue about educational priorities underscores their importance in realising the goals of Universal Elementary Education (Daily Excelsior, 2015). These committees were envisioned as pragmatic instruments to make schools more functional and responsive to local needs, aligning with broader visions of decentralised educational management (Singh, 2014). However, achieving their full potential

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requires not only structural inclusivity but also capacity-building, clearer role definitions, and sustained support to bridge the enduring gaps between policy frameworks and ground-level practices.

## Data and Method

Drawing on primary data from Ladakh, this study explores the scope, effectiveness, and challenges of Village Education Committee (VEC) involvement in improving the performance of government schools. It focuses on their participation in school governance, efforts to support enrolment and retention, initiatives to promote co-curricular activities, and the various difficulties they encounter within the school environment. The study was conducted in the two districts of Ladakh—Leh and Kargil. According to the Department of School Education, Ladakh has 709 government elementary schools, including pre-primary, primary, and upper primary levels. Of these, 246 are in Leh and 463 in Kargil. To ensure proportionate representation, a stratified random sampling technique was employed, with the sample drawn in accordance with the distribution of schools across the two districts. A total of 50 schools were selected, comprising 17 from Leh and 33 from Kargil.

From each selected school, three VEC members were purposively chosen to capture diverse viewpoints. The selected members included: the Chairperson, typically the head teacher or headmaster; a woman member, usually a woman panchayat member or parent representative to ensure gender balance; and a community representative, such as a member from disadvantaged groups (e.g., SC/ST), retired teachers, or respected village elders actively engaged in school affairs. This resulted in a total of 150 respondents, with three members selected from each of the 50 sampled schools for comprehensive data collection. Data was gathered through interviews with the VEC members to understand their role in promoting quality education throughout Ladakh.

## Key Findings

The study highlights that many Village Education Committee (VEC) members in Ladakh are actively involved in supporting school functioning. Their roles extend from routine planning and management to more proactive efforts such as preparing education plans, meeting with teachers to address academic issues, and organising awareness drives to improve enrolment, especially in areas with low student turnout in government schools. In some cases, VECs have taken special initiatives to support students from marginalised communities through health awareness campaigns, educational tours, and remedial interventions. Decision-making among members is

generally collaborative, with responsibilities also extending to the organisation of extracurricular programmes aimed at fostering holistic development among students.

However, the extent of VEC engagement varies. While many members regularly visit schools to monitor attendance and ensure the continuity of teaching and learning, others participate less frequently or only on special occasions. Attention to civil works and infrastructure monitoring is notably limited, indicating a possible lack of awareness or capacity to manage these responsibilities. The preparation of annual school plans and budgets also reflects inconsistencies; while some members reported participatory processes, others noted that decisions were primarily driven by school authorities. Nevertheless, discussions around financial records are common in meetings, suggesting partial efforts toward transparency. Regional differences were observed, with Leh showing greater community participation and responsiveness to enrolment challenges compared to Kargil.

Despite some encouraging signs, VECs across both Leh and Kargil face serious systemic and logistical hurdles. Many government schools operate with inadequate infrastructure, lacking teaching aids, transport, electricity, heating, computer labs, and even essential amenities like clean drinking water and student hostels. Parental disengagement, insufficient departmental support, and the limited availability of qualified staff especially subject specialists further undermine the quality of education. VEC members themselves face challenges due to educational limitations, unclear role expectations, and irregular attendance at meetings. In Leh, a preference for private schools among parents hinders the impact of VEC initiatives in public schools, while in Kargil, low levels of interest among some committee members in educational matters restrict the scope for meaningful reform and school improvement.

## Policy Suggestions

Based on the study's findings, the following policy suggestions are proposed to improve the effectiveness of Village Education Committees (VECs) and support the advancement of quality elementary education in Ladakh.

- Regular orientation and refresher training programmes should be conducted for VEC members to improve their understanding of roles and responsibilities, particularly in the areas of school planning, budgeting, and monitoring. Special training modules should be designed for women and less-educated members to encourage inclusive participation.



- A well-defined framework outlining the duties of VEC members should be disseminated at the village level. Introducing mechanisms such as attendance-linked incentives or recognition programmes can enhance member accountability and reduce absenteeism.
- Awareness drives must be launched to reinforce the significance of community participation in school management. Stronger linkages between parents, VECs, and schools should be built through regular consultations and community feedback mechanisms.
- VEC members should be provided basic ICT training to support planning, monitoring, and reporting tasks. Additionally, schools should be equipped with computers and internet access, and the shortage of computer instructors should be addressed through targeted recruitment.
- VECs must be supported in formulating local strategies to enhance girls' enrolment and retention. This can include community sensitisation programmes, gender-friendly school infrastructure, and scholarships or support schemes tailored to girls.
- Recognising the regional disparities, customised interventions should be adopted. In Leh, efforts must focus on increasing parental engagement and community outreach, while in Kargil, motivation and capacity-building measures for VEC members should be prioritised.
- Performance-based incentives such as public recognition, awards, or additional grants should be introduced to motivate VECs that demonstrate effective school governance and community engagement.
- A district-level VEC support cell should be established to offer continuous capacity building, troubleshoot implementation challenges, and monitor the effectiveness of VECs using standard performance indicators.

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