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and Service Delivery:
Evidence from Karnataka**

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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN VILLAGE ASSEMBLY MEETINGS AND SERVICE DELIVERY: EVIDENCE FROM KARNATAKA

R Manjula*

Abstract

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment makes a provision for the village assembly (Ward and Grama Sabha) meetings to enable citizens to participate and present their needs and preferences to improve decentralised governance. Karnataka, being a pioneer in democratic decentralisation, has initiated reforms in the design of these institutional mechanisms so that people could participate and prioritise their needs, select beneficiaries and monitor the progress of programmes. The existing literature shows that the citizen participation in the Ward and Grama Sabhas has been low and uneven. The literature on who participates in these meetings, and implications of participation on service delivery is also scanty. To address this gap in the literature, this paper examines the social status of the participants in the village assembly meetings and the implications of their participation on service delivery. The study objectives are explored with the help of primary data on participation in village assembly meetings collected from 154 Grama Panchayats spread across nine districts in Karnataka. It also explores the type of households participating in village assembly meetings. An attempt is also made to relate performance in service delivery with citizens' participation in village assembly meetings.

Key words: Participation, Grama Sabha, Trust, Service delivery, Karnataka

Introduction

Decentralisation is defined as “the devolution of political, administrative and fiscal powers from the centre to the locally elected government, and the participation of people and the presence of their voices in improving service delivery and development through the local government” (Rajasekhar 2022: 4). Decentralisation is propagated all over the world on the grounds that it will bring good development outcomes. The decentralised government, being closer to the people, is in a more advantageous position to obtain information on the needs and preferences of citizens, identify their problems and prioritise the needs of citizens. This helps them to formulate effective plans for economic development and improved service delivery.

Elected leaders in decentralised government have incentives to design and implement policies that align with the needs and preferences of the people. By tailoring plans to local demands, they can ensure that citizens including those from their constituency benefit from such need-based decentralised plans (Crook and Sverrisson 2001; Blair 2000; Crook and Manor 1998; Manor 1999; Rondinelli *et al* 1989; Kulipossa 2004; Rajasekhar 2022).

A political argument that is often made in support of decentralised government is that decentralisation promotes true democracy by way of enabling the participation of the people in governance and accountability (Rondinelli 1983; Kulipossa 2004; Sharma 2006). From the fiscal

* Assistant Professor, Centre for Decentralisation and Development, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru. Email: manjula@isec.ac.in.

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perspective, Oates (1972) suggests that local planning leads to more cost-efficient service delivery, as decentralised governments are better equipped to consider local preferences as compared to the central government.

It is expected that the decentralised government will strengthen the relationship between elected leaders and the people through the mechanisms of tax mobilisation and voting in the elections (Rajasekhar *et al* 2018a). The elected leaders will have to be accountable to the citizens by incorporating the needs and preferences of the people in the planning and implementation of development plans. Accountability of elected leaders can further be enhanced through people's organisations such as community-based organisations (Blair 2000; Crook and Manor 1998; Manor 1999; Rondinelli *et al* 1989). These inherent strengths have contributed to the introduction of democratic decentralisation in several developing countries especially since the 1990s (Manor 1999).

Decentralised government is expected to contribute to poverty reduction in several ways (Johnson 2001). First, democratisation and empowerment of local elected bodies will lead to the participation of the people, especially by those belonging to disadvantaged groups (Crook and Sverrisson 2001; Blair 2000; Crook and Manor 1998). Frequent elections to decentralised government, introduction of transparency mechanisms and devolution of political powers have the potential to empower the poor and enabling their participation in local decision making and holding the government officials accountable for their actions (Crook and Sverrisson 2001; Blair 2000; Crook and Manor 1998; Manor 1999; Rondinelli *et al* 1989). Policies of providing reservations to disadvantaged groups of women and depressed castes, as in the case of India, can help these disadvantaged groups to have a voice in the local bodies (Crook and Manor 1998). Because of these, local elected government is expected to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of public officials and improve service delivery (Blair 2000; Crook and Sverrisson 2001; Crook and Manor 1998; Manor 1999).

Thus, decentralisation promotes true democracy by way of enabling peoples' participation in the governance and accountability. Grama Sabhas and Ward Sabhas are the important mechanisms which provide space for citizens to participate at the local level to achieve good development outcomes. These institutions are therefore called as "invited space" for citizen participation (Aiyar 2010).

Deliberation among citizens, elected representatives and officials is essential to arrive at the decision-making, which is in a way necessary for 'deliberative democracy' (Heller and Rao 2015). Deliberations on several important aspects such as the provision of public services, selection of beneficiaries, awareness on the programmes, preparation of plans and implementation and so on are important to promote grassroots democracy. Elected local councils in many developing countries often ridiculed as "talking shops" (Fernandez 2003), while others do not find Grama Sabhas to be mere 'talking shops' (Ban, Jha and Rao 2012).

There has been considerable research on extent of awareness on Ward/Grama Sabhas, frequency of meetings conducted as against the mandate, the extent of people's participation in these meetings, type of issues discussed in these meetings, distribution of benefits and so on (Rajasekhar *et al* 2018a and 2018b). Similarly, the reasons for people not attending these meetings, importance of participation in Grama Sabha and Ward Sabha meetings are also well researched areas. However, the literature on background of participants in the Ward and Grama Sabha meetings and performance of

participation in village assembly meeting on service delivery is scanty. This paper contributes to the existing literature by providing the background of participants in village assembly meetings. Another important contribution is that this paper shows the role of trust in decentralised government in influencing the participation of citizens in decentralised governance.

Objectives and Methodology

Against this background, this paper examines who participates in Ward and Grama Sabha meetings and implications that this would have on service delivery. The paper also examines whether the participation in Ward and Grama Sabha meetings varied across different regions of Karnataka and caste groups. It also explores the type of households participating in these meetings. An attempt is also made to relate performance in service delivery with citizen participation in Grama Sabha meetings.

This paper uses the primary data collected as part of a larger study undertaken by the Centre for Decentralisation and Development. The data for the study were collected from the nine districts. These districts belong to different agro-climatic and administrative zones (Kalaburagi, Belagavi, Mysuru and Bengaluru) in Karnataka. Kalaburagi and Ballari are selected from Kalaburagi division from north Karnataka region and these are semi-arid districts. Gadag and Haveri are from Belagavi division, and these are also semi-arid districts. Two districts, namely Dakshina Kannada and Chamarajanagar were selected from Mysuru division. While the former is a developed district, the latter is backward district. Three districts, namely Tumakuru, Chikkaballapura and Kolar were selected from Bangalore division. The primary data were collected in the mid-2017 from 2,232 households spread across 154 villages from the same number of GPs in these nine districts. From each village, 15 households were selected with the help of the systematic random sampling method. The information collected from the sample households included their participation in the Ward and Grama Sabha meetings and their assessment on the services delivered by the local government.

Legal Provisions

Before we present the main results, a brief discussion on legal provisions relating to village assembly meetings is provided in this section. Ward and Grama Sabhas are institutional spaces created within the local government to ensure the citizens' participation. The village assembly meetings enable the structured interactions between citizens and the policy makers (elected leaders and officials).

Article 243 of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act defines Grama Sabha as a body which consists of adult persons registered in the electoral rolls pertaining to a village coming under the jurisdiction of panchayat. Regarding powers and functions of the Grama Sabha, the Constitution left it to the respective states to specify the same. Accordingly, Article 243(A) specifies that a Grama Sabha may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the Legislature of a state may, by law, provide. Rajasekhar and Manjula (2022) provide details on powers and functions of Grama Sabha in all the Indian states.

The broad intention of having an institution like Grama Sabha is to "maximise the opportunities for poor and socially marginalised groups and to exert influence over policy choice, resource allocation and programme design" (Robinson, 1998: 153). The vision of Grama Sabha is as follows (Rajasekhar

and Manjula 2022: 137): i) periodic meetings of Grama Sabha will assess the situation of citizens, identify and prioritise their needs and preferences, prepare decentralised plans and implement and monitor the same. This process contributes to efficient allocation of scarce resources and the undertaking of development activities that are preferred by most of the citizens; ii) Grama Sabha meetings will improve the quality of decentralised rural governance as people participate and seek to ensure accountability through social audit and schematic/ programmatic review; iii) Grama Sabha meetings contribute to inclusive development by enabling citizens to participate in local budget decisions and spending choices, thereby contributing to citizen satisfaction, better delivery of public services and inclusion of disadvantaged groups – those belonging to scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) and women. Through Grama Sabha, the citizens can exercise their voices and thereby demand accountability and transparency of local officials and elected representatives in their administration and development.

Following are the two ways in which Grama Sabha may improve the functioning of the local government. "First, relative to elected representatives, these meetings may better reflect citizens' preferences on issues such as how to target resources to the neediest groups. Second, by providing a forum for monitoring the actions of elected representatives, they may reduce agency problems in politics, and the extent of corruption" (Besley *et al*/2008: 253).

Complying with the mandatory Constitutional provisions for Grama Sabha, the Karnataka government incorporated Grama Sabha in the original KPR Act, 1993. Initially, Grama Sabhas were to be held in each of the revenue villages. Having village assembly meeting at the Grama Panchayat level resulted in underrepresentation of vulnerable groups in the final Grama Sabhas where the key decisions are normally taken. To strengthen the decentralisation process in Karnataka, Government of Karnataka had set up a working group on decentralisation in 2002. Accordingly, this committee recommended the introduction of Ward Sabhas (constituency-wise). The members of Ward Sabha consist of voters from a constituency in the panchayat. Grama Sabha is specific to the entire grama panchayat, while Ward Sabha meetings are held for each ward of the elected members of the panchayat.

Both Ward Sabhas and Grama Sabhas should be held once in six months¹. The quorum of Ward Sabha meeting should "not be less than one-tenth of the total number of members of the Ward Sabha or twenty members", while the quorum of Grama Sabha is "not less than one-tenth of the total number of members of the Grama Sabha or a hundred members, whichever is less" (Puliani 2014: 27 & 29).

As far as the conduct of Ward and Grama Sabha meetings is concerned, citizens were informed about the date and timings of Ward Sabha and Grama Sabha meetings through different modes of communication such as through *Dandora/Tom-Tom*, making public announcements, distribution of pamphlets and sending information through grama panchayat members/ officials. This shows that there was no major difference in the mode of communication for providing information on Grama Sabhas and Ward Sabhas.

There are a few studies on village assembly meetings in Karnataka. The paper by Besley, Pande and Rao (2007) note that the number of Grama Sabha meetings was low. However, the studies

¹ In some states of India, Grama Sabhas are held four times in a year; but in Karnataka it is mandated to be held once in six months.

by Rajasekhar *et al* (2018a) and Rajasekhar and Manjula (2022) provide evidence on the incidence of citizen participation in the village assembly meetings and conclude that the citizen participation was, in general, better especially after the introduction of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Rajasekhar, Manjula and Babu (2018a) and Rajasekhar, Kurosaki, Manjula and Mori (2025) provide factors influencing participation² in village assembly meetings. In these studies, barring Rajasekhar, Kurosaki, Manjula and Mori (2025), the social and economic background of participants is not provided.

The performance of village assembly meetings is also looked by a few studies. Besley, Pande and Rao (2008) examined the role of Grama Sabha in the selection of BPL households and concluded that their role was relatively limited. In another paper (Besley, Pande and Rao 2005) they looked at beneficiary selection by Grama Sabha and concluded that only in about 1/5th of villages the beneficiary selection was done by the Grama Sabha. Kannan (2013) found that participation in Grama Sabha had a positive impact on the access to the inputs from the agricultural department. Rajasekhar, Kurosaki, Manjula and Mori (2025) seek to examine the association between participation in Ward Sabha meetings and allocation of public goods. The present study is different in the sense that it seeks to analyse association between citizen participation and performance of GPs in the delivery of basic services. Unlike all the previous studies, this paper examines the question of whether the trust in Grama Panchayat contributes to citizen participation in village assembly meetings.

Citizen Participation in the Ward and Grama Sabhas

In this section, we will provide the evidence on citizen participation in Ward and Grama Sabhas with the help of primary data collected from nine Karnataka districts. Before we examine the extent of citizen participation in the Ward and Grama Sabha, the profile of sample GPs and households is discussed below.

A brief profile of the sample GPs in Table 1 shows that the average number of villages per GP ranged from 1.75 in Dakshina Kannada to 10.22 in Kolar. Similarly, the number of wards was comparatively lower in Dakshina Kannada, Gadag and Haveri, while it was higher in Kolar and ChamaraJanagar. The average population per GP was around 8,000 in Ballari and Gadag districts, whereas it was the least in Tumakuru and Chikkaballapura. Interestingly, the average female population per GP was higher in Dakshina Kannada probably because of higher human resource development in the district.

² First, the households do not have specific information about the date of the meeting, timings and the place of meeting. Second, even if one is aware, women typically do not attend; in fact, only male members attend. Third, some households are preoccupied with their livelihood concerns. Fourth, in some cases the meetings were not properly organised by the panchayats.

Table 1: Brief Profile of the Sample GPs

Particulars	Dakshina Kannada	Gadag	Haveri	Chamaraja -nagar	Tumakuru	Chikka ballapura	Kolar	Kalaburagi	Ballari
Number of GPs	24	7	17	17	19	21	23	11	15
Average no. of villages per GP	1.75 (0.61)	4.14 (1.21)	3.24 (1.75)	4.06 (1.56)	4.42 (1.17)	4.86 (2.13)	10.22 (3.81)	4.55 (1.21)	2.6 (1.18)
Average no. of ward per GP	4.58 (1.82)	4.71 (1.80)	5.24 (3.38)	8.18 (5.14)	6.95 (4.40)	5.86 (2.22)	9.00 (5.16)	6.27 (2.00)	5.87 (1.60)
Average no. of HHs per GP	1349.88 (676.66)	1644.86 (235.46)	1368.47 (550.33)	1786.65 (575.15)	1548.05 (645.29)	1735.05 (352.00)	1607.04 (416.69)	1617.55 (730.58)	1953.60 (1127.82)
Average female population per GP	3330.13 (314.05)	3899.00 (1222.70)	3138.94 (1024.16)	3389.59 (1303.26)	3048.26 (1210.17)	3216.38 (1026.45)	3488.78 (694.48)	3812.73 (2074.87)	3993.00 (1158.41)
Average male population per GP	3278.79 (1499.63)	4127.29 (890.80)	3561.94 (1357.03)	3527.12 (1343.67)	3283.63 (1333.79)	3350.91 (1148.54)	3700.30 (821.53)	3945.82 (1985.80)	4084.53 (1362.16)
Average total population per GP	6608.92 (2730.79)	8026.29 (1910.24)	6700.88 (2349.45)	6916.77 (2625.22)	6331.95 (2378.38)	6567.33 (2111.16)	7189.09 (1498.02)	7758.64 (4041.26)	8077.53 (2463.32)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 2 on profile of sample households shows that most of the sample households belonged to SC/ST caste (44%) and only 16 percent of the sample households belonged to the dominant castes. In this paper, households belonging to Lingayat, Vokkaliga, Reddy are classified as dominant castes³. Households belonging to these castes, typically, had numerical preponderance, control over land and economic resources and political decision-making. About 58 percent of households depended on wage labour for eking their livelihood. Over 90 percent of the sample possessed BPL ration cards. Female headed households comprised about 15 percent. Close to two-thirds of the sample had obtained membership in different institutions which are mainly self-help groups functioning at the village level for undertaking savings and credit activities. Very miniscule proportion (1%) of households had elected representatives to grama panchayat either in the past or incumbent members at the time of survey.

Table 2: Summary Statistics of the Sample Households

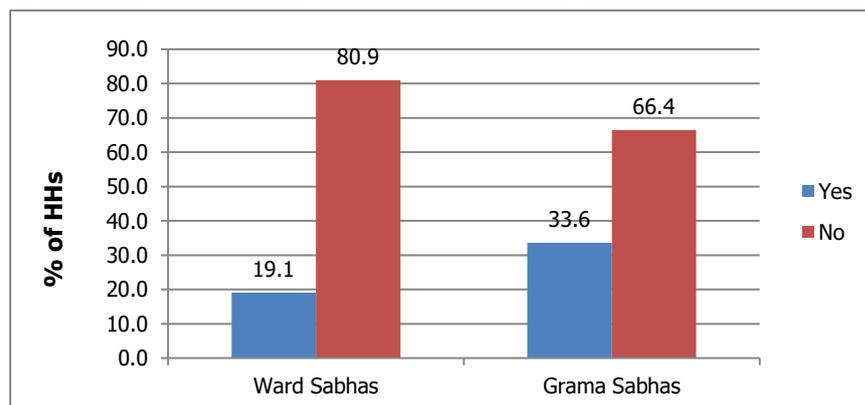
Households belonging to SC/ST caste	0.44 (0.50)
Households belonging to minorities	0.07 (0.25)
Households belonging to other backward castes	0.33 (0.47)
Households belonging to dominant castes	0.16 (0.36)
Principal occupation of HHs is wage labour	0.58 (0.49)
BPL ration card holders	0.93 (0.25)
Female-headed households	0.15 (0.35)
Households having GP members	0.01 (0.11)
Households having institutional membership (other than GP)	0.65 (0.48)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

³ Defined as those castes which are dominant in numerical terms as well as in the control of economic and political power in a village.

A question on whether anyone from their households had attended the Ward and Gram Sabhas was posed to the sample households. The responses to this question are provided in Figure 1. In general, participation in village assembly meetings is low. Less than one-fifth of sample households reported to have attended the Ward Sabhas. Comparatively, the participation in the Grama Sabha meetings tended to be better among the sample households. Over one-third of the households stated that someone from their households participated in the Gram Sabha meeting.

Figure 1: Proportion of Sample Households Attending Ward and Grama Sabhas



The participation of citizens is also examined across different categories of the districts. Based on the District Composite Development Index, the sample districts are categorised as 'better performing' (i.e., districts obtaining ranks between 1 and 10), 'average performing' (districts falling in the range of 11 to 20 ranks) and 'poor performing' (districts obtaining ranks from 21 to 30). Accordingly, the nine sample districts are categorised as follows. Dakshina Kannada is the better performing district, Gadag, Haveri, Chamarajanagar, Tumakuru, Chikkaballapura and Kolar are average performing districts and Kalaburagi and Ballari are poor performing.

As can be expected, a larger proportion of sample households residing in the 'Better performing districts' have attended the meetings of both Ward and Grama Sabhas. This can be interpreted as follows: people from the developed districts with better education and awareness assign higher importance to the attendance in the meetings of Ward and Grama Sabhas as they could represent their needs and preferences and secure them. The participation of citizens tended to be lower in 'Average performing districts' as compared to 'Poor performing districts' (Figures 2 & 3). The reason for this could be that the proportion of sample households rating key services as good or excellent was lower in poor-performing districts as compared to average poor performing districts. This suggests that the poor quality in the provision of key services has been a major issue in the poorer districts and that this may have positively influenced citizens from these districts to participate in the Grama Sabha. The participation in Grama Sabha varied between 57 percent (in better performing) and 28.7 percent (in average performing), while the corresponding figures in the case of Ward Sabha were 39 percent in better performing districts and 14.9 percent in average performing districts. This shows that there is a positive correlation between the citizen's participation and development status of district. ***This implies that decentralised governance tends to be relatively better in developed districts.***

Figure 2: Distribution of Sample Households (%) by their Attendance in Ward Sabhas and District Categories

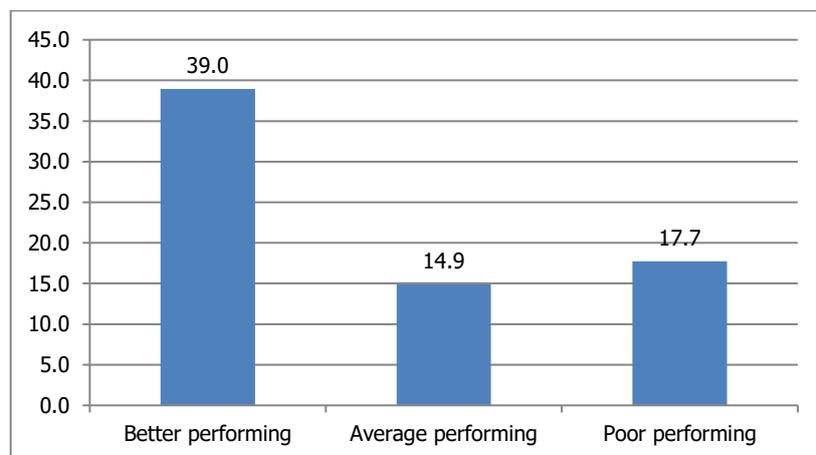
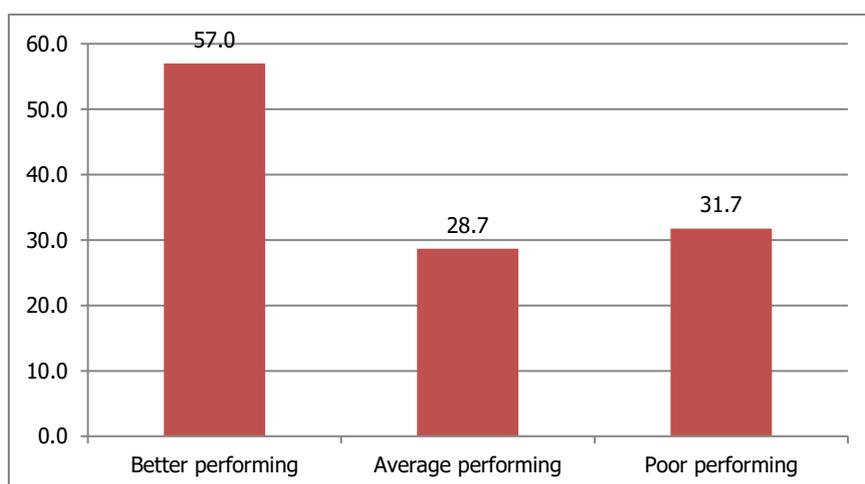
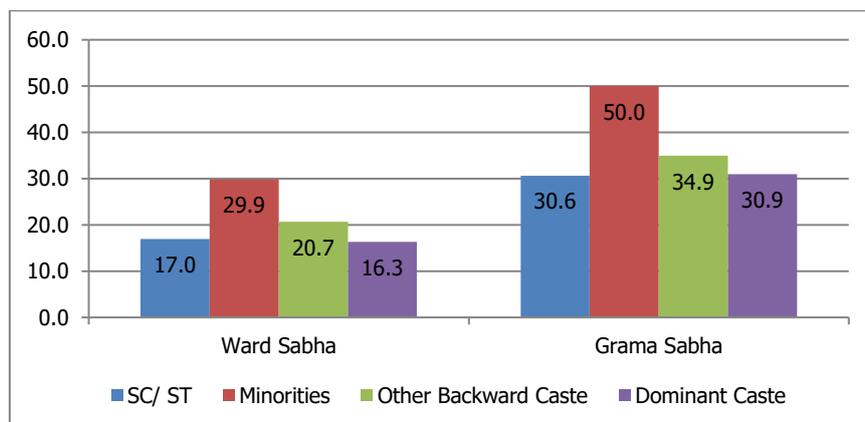


Figure 3: Distribution of Sample Households (%) by their Attendance in Grama Sabhas and District Categories



The participation of households by different caste groups is presented in Figure 4. Among sample SC/ST households, the proportion of households attending Ward Sabhas and Grama Sabhas was 17 percent and 31 percent respectively. Half of the sample households belonging to the minorities have attended Grama Sabha meetings. The reason for the higher participation of households belonging to minority religion is because most of them are from the better performing district of Dakshina Kannada, and higher level of literacy, awareness and civic sense may have prompted them to attend Grama Sabha meetings. Nearly 35 percent of sample households belonging to other backward castes are reported to have attended Grama Sabhas. When it comes to Ward Sabhas, their participation comes down to 20.7 percent.

Figure 4: Distribution of Sample Households (%) by their Participation in the Ward & Grama Sabhas and Caste Categories



Performance of GPs in the Provision of Key Services

Households' opinion on the performance of services delivered by the Grama Panchayat was collected. Sample households were asked to provide their ranking on the delivery of key services on a five-point Likert scale ranging from very poor to excellent. Rating was done on four key services, namely, streetlights, mini water supply, public stand post and drainage. It may be noted that the function of delivering these services is assigned to the Grama Panchayat.

Respondent scores on the performance of Grama Panchayat in the delivery of services are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Across the different services, streetlights seem to be functioning well. About 62 percent of the households rated the service as 'good or excellent'. Over one-fourth of them reported as either 'not provided' the service or termed it as 'poor'. One reason for better rating of streetlight services is because streetlights are installed as per the norm in all the districts except in the better performing district of Dakshina Kannada. In contrast, 62.01 percent of the households stated that the service of mini water supply was either 'not provided at all' or the performance of delivery of drinking water through this source was 'poor'. The functioning of public stand post appears to be mixed, wherein about 40 percent of them termed it as 'good/excellent' and another 44 percent of households ranked it as 'poor' or 'not provided'. When it comes to the provision of drainage service, a majority of the sample households (60.57%) were unhappy and assigned low ranking. In almost all the sample villages, open drainage is provided. With stagnant water attracting flies and mosquitoes, people complained of bad odour and health problems.

Table 3: Distribution of Sample Households (%) by their Rating on Key Services Provided by the Grama Panchayat

Rating	Streetlights	Mini water supply	Public stand post	Drainage
Poor/ not provided at all	27.74	62.01	44.00	60.57
Average	11.2	14.92	14.74	15.73
Good	59.81	22.72	40.14	22.8
Excellent	1.25	0.36	0.85	0.9

The rating on the quality of services varied across the districts. A majority of the households from the better performing districts reported that the four key services were not provided at all. The proportion varied from 61.9 percent in the case of streetlights to 89.5 percent in the case of drainage. This rating is expected! Among our study districts, the better performing district is Dakshina Kannada where the human settlement pattern is scattered, and people reside in undulating terrain. Given the scattered location of houses in the district, the households from several sample villages were not provided with streetlights or drainage. Further, because of the hilly terrain, the provision of piped water supply is not found suitable; hence, households mainly depend on their own open wells. Because of these reasons, many households reported that these public services did not exist in their place of living.

Table 4: Sample Households (%) Rating on Key Services by District Categories

District categories	Not provided at all	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
Streetlights						
Better performing	61.9	2.0	7.3	2.6	26.2	0.0
Average performing	11.0	1.5	5.8	12.6	67.4	1.7
Poor performing	16.9	1.9	7.1	13.5	60.1	0.5
Total	19.8	1.7	6.2	11.2	59.8	1.3
Mini water supply						
Better performing	88.1	0.6	0.6	6.4	4.4	0.0
Average performing	44.8	4.0	7.1	17.0	26.6	0.5
Poor performing	52.1	1.9	7.7	14.6	23.8	0.0
Total	52.7	3.1	6.2	14.9	22.7	0.4
Public stand post						
Better performing	61.0	2.0	1.5	3.5	31.7	0.0
Average performing	30.4	2.8	7.5	15.9	42.1	1.2
Poor performing	30.4	1.9	6.3	20.4	39.9	0.3
Total	35.1	2.5	6.4	14.7	40.1	0.9
Drainage						
Better performing	89.5	2.0	1.2	3.2	4.1	0.0
Average performing	38.1	3.4	10.1	19.0	28.2	1.1
Poor performing	56.6	2.9	7.4	14.0	18.3	0.8
Total	49.1	3.1	8.2	15.7	22.8	0.9

Note: Missing values are excluded.

The provision of streetlight service is comparatively better in 'average performing' and 'poor performing' districts where 83 to 89 percent of households reported that the streetlight service was provided. In other words, streetlight service was better in districts classified as 'average performing' and 'poor performing' as compared to 'better performing'. This is in a way reflected in the scores given by many households which termed the service as 'good' or 'excellent'. One reason for this is that the settlement pattern in better performing district of Dakshina Kannada is scattered in nature, and as a result, the coverage of villages with streetlights is lower in this district.

Over 40 percent of the sample households have rated the delivery of drinking water through public stand post as 'good or excellent'. The rating on the service of public stand post was better as compared to that on mini water supply service. Citizen's dissatisfaction on the drainage service is high as compared to all the other three key services (Table 4).

Who Participates in Ward and Grama Sabha Meetings?

An attempt is made to answer the question of 'which type of households participates in the Ward and Grama Sabha meetings?' This has been done with the help of a probit model wherein the dependent variable is dichotomous with values '1' if a household member participates in these meetings, otherwise '0'. Two separate regressions are worked out – one on participation in Ward Sabha meetings and the other on participation in Grama Sabha meetings. The regression results are presented in Table 5.

The independent variables are **caste, principal occupation, possession of BPL ration card** and **female headed households**. A positive sign between the dependent variable and the independent variables is expected as these households, being vulnerable, have several problems to be represented in these meetings. Another reason is that it is expected that decentralisation promotes inclusiveness by involving different sections of the society in the decision-making process. **Having membership in institutions** (other than GP) may have positive effect as the institutional membership sensitises them the need for attending the meetings for representing the needs and securing the same.

We expect a positive association between the **poor ratings** on four key services and the participation of households in these institutional mechanisms, as it is expected that the citizens voice out whenever the services delivered are poor. As far as the variable on development status of the district is concerned, we anticipate that the expected sign with the **better performing district** is positive because people from developed district are more likely to be educated and aware, and hence, show more willingness and confidence to attend these meetings to express their needs and preferences. The variable on **citizen's trust in the Gram Panchayat** is expected to be positively associated with participation as those having greater trust will believe in the Panchayat to resolve their problems.

The results of regression analysis are presented in Table 5. The first two columns in Table 5 correspond to regressions related to Ward Sabha meetings, while the next two pertain for Grama Sabha meetings. Columns 1 and 3 include variables on household characteristics, rating on the four key public services and citizens' trust in the local government. The columns 2 and 4 substitute the service rating variables with a variable whether the households belong to better performing districts.

Table 5: Who Participates in Ward Sabhas and Grama Sabhas?

	Attending Ward Sabhas		Attending Grama Sabhas	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
SC/ST households	-0.11 (0.076)	0.013 (0.077)	-0.12* (0.063)	-0.0058 (0.063)
Wage labour dependent HHs	-0.17** (0.070)	-0.19*** (0.072)	-0.18*** (0.062)	-0.20*** (0.063)
Female headed households	-0.16* (0.090)	-0.23** (0.093)	-0.36*** (0.084)	-0.42*** (0.086)
Having BPL ration card	-0.18 (0.11)	-0.050 (0.11)	-0.046 (0.11)	0.082 (0.11)
Having institutional membership	0.29*** (0.073)	0.19** (0.075)	0.30*** (0.062)	0.22*** (0.061)
Poor rating for streetlight	0.030 (0.11)		0.13 (0.11)	
Poor rating for mini water supply	0.092 (0.12)		-0.036 (0.10)	
Poor rating for public stand post	0.058 (0.11)		0.20* (0.11)	
Poor rating for drainage	-0.25** (0.12)		-0.25** (0.097)	
Trust the GP to look after our interests	0.34*** (0.077)	0.28*** (0.080)	0.26*** (0.063)	0.21*** (0.064)
Better performing districts		0.69*** (0.087)		0.70*** (0.079)
_cons	-0.92*** (0.14)	-1.12*** (0.15)	-0.52*** (0.12)	-0.71*** (0.12)
<i>N</i>	2232	2232	2232	2232

Note: Probit regression. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the village level.

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

The key results from the regression analysis are almost the same as in the case of participation of citizens in Ward and Grama Sabha meetings excepting regarding two variables.

- When it comes to Ward Sabha, the caste of the household does not seem to matter. However, a marginal significance on caste can be seen in the regression results pertaining to Grama Sabhas. The caste of the household is negatively associated with the participation. This means that SC/ST households are less likely to attend the Grama Sabha. However, it loses its significance when the other explanatory variables are included.
- Wage labour dependent households and households having female as head are negatively associated with the participation. This is true in the case of participation in Ward Sabha as well as Grama Sabha meetings. This means that they are less likely to participate in these statutory meetings. There are instances where the 'voices' of the citizens belonging to marginalised sections were not heard and that led to 'exit'. Appadurai (2004) notes that 'voices' are critical to engage

with poor and 'exit' is not a desirable solution for the poor; hence, the capacity of the poor must be strengthened so that they raise their "voices".

- Households having membership in different institutions such as SHGs, youth association, etc., are more likely to participate in both Ward and Grama Sabha meetings. This implies that the households having membership in local organisations like SHGs or youth clubs tend to be better informed and more motivated to attend village assembly meetings either due to membership in these groups enhancing individual sense of agency or access to information or peer influence.
- The households who termed drainage service as 'very poor' or 'poor' are less likely to represent this service problem in either Ward or Grama Sabha meetings. This shows that households are not aware of the health implication due to bad drainage. Alternatively, households may not associate much importance to this service.
- However, a marginal effect exists on those households who rated the service of public stand post as poor. This means that these households are more likely to participate in the Grama Sabha to present the poor service quality.
- Expectedly, the households from the better performing district are more likely to participate in Ward Sabhas as well as Grama Sabhas. In the literature it is shown that the participation is better in the developed districts as compared to backward districts (Rajasekhar *et al* 2018a).
- Another interesting result is that trust in the local government among the households seems to be crucial as this leads to their active participation in the decentralised governance. When households perceive GPs as trustworthy, then they are more likely to participate in Ward as well as Grama Sabha meetings.
- Other variables such as households' giving poor rating for streetlight or mini water supply services or BPL status of the households do not seem to be having any significant effect on their participation.

Conclusions

Decentralised government being close to people is expected to have several advantages. Grama Sabhas and Ward Sabhas are important institutional mechanisms where citizens can participate to represent their needs and preferences, and prepare, implement and monitor plans. Given the low and uneven participation in Ward Sabhas and Grama Sabhas, a question that becomes interesting is who participates in the meetings of these village level institutions. In this paper, we examine this question with the help of the data collected from over 2000 sample households spread across nine districts in Karnataka.

The key conclusions that emerge from the analysis are the following. In general, citizens' participation is low in Ward Sabha as well as Grama Sabha. However, participation in Grama Sabhas is comparatively better especially in developed districts. Although citizens assign poor rating on the quality of basic services, not all of them were represented in the meetings. Water seems to be a primary concern, while poor drainage facility does not seem to be bothering enough to represent the problem in the Ward and Grama Sabha meetings. There is an 'exit' of vulnerable households especially those from wage labour dependent and female headed households. This implies that voices of the poor and

vulnerable citizens are not presented and are excluded from the key decision-making process. This does not augur well for decentralised governance. However, the citizens having greater trust on Grama Panchayat have actively participated in the decentralised governance. There is thus a need to make the decentralised governance more inclusive and make necessary efforts to reach out to the vulnerable sections of the society.

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Dr V K R V Rao Road, Nagarabhavi P.O., Bangalore - 560 072, India
Phone: 0091-80-23215468, 23215519, 23215592; Fax: 0091-80-23217008

E-mail: sobin@isec.ac.in; Web: www.isec.ac.in