

A Study On Low Participation In Gram Sabha: A Case Study Of Sawombung Gram Panchayat, Imphal East, Manipur

Themshingphi Konghay¹

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18087857>

Review:19/12/2025

Acceptance: 21/12/2025

Publication:29/12/2025

Abstract: In India, the Gram Sabha is a constitutionally mandated organisation meant to strengthen grassroots governance through increased participation in the democratic process. However, while there is great potential for increased participation in Gram Sabha, the reality for many villages is that only a small number of villagers attend the Gram Sabha. The purpose of this research study was to identify the factors that contributed to the low level of participation in Gram Sabha meetings amongst the residents of Sawombung Gram Panchayat, Imphal East District, Manipur. A mixed method design was used for this study and included a household survey, personal interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and direct observation of the Gram Sabha. The total number of respondents included individuals of all socio-economic strata who were over 18 years of age. The research data revealed that many factors contributed to the low level of participation in the Gram Sabha. These findings demonstrate the need to improve the level of communication between government officials and community members as well as to create opportunities for more people to be included in decision negotiations through community meetings and develop a greater awareness of the function of the Gram Sabha.

Keywords: Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayat, Participation, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Local Governance, Manipur

Introduction: The Gram Sabha has been envisioned as the foundation of the Panchayati Raj System. It was established under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992. The Gram Sabha consists of all adult members of a village whose names are included in the electoral rolls of the Gram Panchayat area. It is conducted for a minimum of 6 times a year by the Gram Panchayat providing a platform and allowing villagers to participate directly in decision making, planning and overall development of the village. Article 243(g) defines a Village as an area specified by the governor, which may include a group of villages. Article 243(a) empowers the Gram Sabha to exercise powers and perform functions as provided by state law. According to Article 243(b) of the Indian Constitution, the Gram Sabha consists of individuals registered in the electoral rolls of a village within a Panchayat area. The Gram Panchayat is the governing body that carries out the guidelines for growth and use of resources, but the Gram Sabha also has a supervisory and deliberative role. It has the following primary responsibilities:

1. Approving Plans and Budgets - Reviewing and approving the Gram Panchayat's yearly plan for growth and a financial proposal to execute that plan.
2. Oversight and Accountability - Ensuring that the Gram Panchayat's projects, programmes, and expenditure are tracked, which provides for transparency.
3. Decision Making - Approved and discussed issues about the use of land and local resources, welfare projects, and more.

¹ Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, Email: themshingphikonghay@gmail.com

4. Community Empowerment - The Gram Sabha provides a venue for every villager, including the most underrepresented groups, to share their wants, needs, and ambitions.

The Gram Sabha is a means of increasing democracy at the grassroots and helping the Gram Panchayat to remain accountable to the community and involve the community in the delivery of public services and other growth-oriented activities.

Review of Literature: Numerous studies conducted in the past two decades have indicated a number of factors that influence a community's ability to become involved in their local government through the Gram Sabha. According to Rao and Sanyal (2010), major impediments to meaningful participation in the Gram Sabha include a lack of awareness, dominance of elites, and bureaucratic control. Studies in the northeastern states of India have found that political polarization, fear of conflict, and weak institutional support discourage participation (Singh, 2018). In view of this literature, however, there is little research examining the micro-level factors affecting Gram Sabha participation in Manipur, particularly in the Imphal East district. The purpose of this proposed research is to understand how socio-economic, administrative and political factors affect the level of participation in the Sawombung Gram Panchayat.

Objectives of the study: The following are the objective of the study:

- To identify and analyse the factors responsible for low participation of the electors (members of Gram Sabha) in Gram Sabha meetings.
- To assess the impact of low participation on local governance, decision-making processes and local development.
- To propose recommendations for enhancing participation of the members in Gram Sabha and strengthening its role in effective functioning of Gram Panchayats and development

Research Methodology:

Sampling Techniques: A multi-stage sampling method was employed.

- In the first stage, Sawombung Gram Panchayat was selected purposively.
- In the second stage, villages within the Panchayat were selected to capture demographic and cultural diversity.
- In the third stage, households and respondents were selected using stratified random sampling, ensuring representation from various socio-economic categories, genders, and age groups.

The sample size may be determined using standard statistical procedures or based on data saturation in the case of qualitative components.

Research Design: The study adopts a mixed-method research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain a holistic understanding of participation patterns in local governance. The mixed-method approach allows for the integration of numerical data with in-depth insights from community experiences, thereby strengthening the validity and reliability of the finding. Keeping in mind the objective of the study and the parameters to be studied, interviews were conducted to collect primary data from the respondents through personal interview. Collected data were analysed by using simple statistical tools viz frequency and percentage.

Data collection: A comprehensive questionnaire encompassing a wide array of crucial aspects related to Gram Sabha functioning is designed to conduct the Study and to collect data on participation patterns, reasons for non-participation, and perceptions of Gram Sabha.

Results and Discussion: This study has been specifically attached to the Sawombung Gram Panchayat situated in the Imphal East District of Manipur. The Panchayat is made up of 5 Villages whereby one of the villages belong to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) Community. The Gram Panchayat establishes a platform for analysing and comparing the different factors that shape the Local Participation of Individuals across several Socio-Economic, Cultural, and Geographical conditions.

Table 1: Basic Profile of Sawombung Gram Panchayat

Particulars	Details
Number of Wards	10
Number of Ward Members	Male: 7 Female: 3 Total: 10
Population	Male: 3,851 Female: 4,635 Total: 8,630
Number of Voters	Male: 2,391 Female: 2,571 Total: 4,962
Number of Households	2,600
SC Households	0
ST Households	400
OBC Households	0

Source: Gram Panchayat Records, Sawombung

Table 2: Occupational Profile of Households in Sawombung Gram Panchayat

Occupational Category	Number of Households
Households engaged mainly in own farm activities	800
Households engaged in MSM enterprises	200
Households engaged in business activities	200
Households engaged as agricultural / non-agricultural labourers	500
Self-Help Groups (SHGs) involved in income-generating activities	10

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 3: Economic Profile of Households

Economic Category	Number of Households
Below Poverty Line (BPL) households	1,600
Above Poverty Line (APL) households	200
Households receiving AAY benefits	1,500

Source: Gram Panchayat Records

The data from Table 1,2 and 3 shows the basic demographic profile and the occupational structure of the Gram Panchayat. This data was collected in order to gain in-depth understanding of the GPs socio economic conditions. Examining these aspects gives important context to the level of participation in Gram Sabha. Moreover, it also helps in identifying the underlying socio-economic factors that may contribute to low participation in GS.

Table 4: Attendance in Last Five Gram Sabha Meetings

Meeting Number	Number of Members Attended	Percentage of Attendance
Meeting 1	406	8.1%
Meeting 2	260	5.2%
Meeting 3	320	6.4%
Meeting 4	252	5.0%
Meeting 5	292	5.8%

Mandated Quorum: 10% (Manipur Panchayati Raj Act, 1994)

Source: Minutes of Gram Sabha Meetings & Field Observation

According to the information presented in Table 3, there was not enough attendance to meet the required quorum for all five Gram Sabha meetings conducted. The consistent lack of meeting this quorum indicates low levels of participation during the meetings of the Gram Sabha. The data was provided by the gram panchayat secretary from the minutes of the meeting recorded and also through personal observation of the Gram Sabha meetings.

Table 5: Reasons for Low Participation in Gram Sabha Meetings

Reasons for Low Participation	Percentage (%)
Members feel their voices are not heard / issues ignored	25
Time fixed for Gram Sabha meetings was not suitable	22
Annoyance due to corrupt practices in Gram Panchayat	20
Members do not support ruling political party/leaders	18
Dissatisfaction with the quality of Service delivered	15

Source: Field Survey, 2024

(Multiple responses recorded)

Table 5 presents the opinions of Gram Sabha members regarding the major reasons for low participation in Gram Sabha meetings in Sawombung Gram Panchayat. The data reveals that there are multiple factors contributing to poor attendance showing administrative, institutional and socio-political challenges within the local governance system. The first major reason listed was the perception of Gram Sabha members that their voices are not being heard and the issues they raise at the meetings are ignored. Twenty-five percent of the respondents stated this as a reason for their low level of participation. The implication of this perception is weak participatory practices and limited responsiveness of the Gram Panchayat to the needs of the community. Therefore, it is understandable why this perception leads to frustration and reduced participation from many people in the community.

Twenty-two percent of the Gram Sabha members cited the time fixed for holding Gram Sabha meetings as unsuitable for their attendance as a reason for their low level of participation. Most villagers, particularly farmers

and those who earn their living from daily wages, are not able to attend meetings held during working hours. Thus, it indicates that the meeting times were not appropriate for the socio-economic demographics of the community. At least twenty percent of the responses regarding low attendance were related to perceived corrupt practices of the Gram Panchayat. The lack of transparency, favouritism and misuse of government resources diminish public trust in the local government and deter residents of the community from participating in the governance process.

According to the responses, eighteen percent of respondents indicated their political affiliation with the ruling political party or local leadership is a barrier to their participation in the meetings. The politicization of Gram Sabha meetings appears to be significant, as individuals with a different political agenda may feel shunned and not encouraged to participate in the meetings openly. In conclusion, many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the Gram Panchayat's services, indicating that perceived inefficiency/effectiveness of local government weakens the confidence of citizens in Gram Sabha as an effective vehicle for community participation.

Table 5 demonstrates that low levels of participation are the result of a combination of Administrative Inefficiencies; Socio-Economic Constraints; Political Divisions; and Dissatisfaction with Service Delivery. To enhance Participatory Democracy and the Functioning Effectiveness of the Gram Sabha's Work, remedying the factors outlined is important.

Table 6: Gender Composition of Gram Sabha Participants (Observed)

Category	Percentage (%)
Women (mostly SHG members)	80
Men	20

Source: Direct Observation during Gram Sabha Meetings

In Table 6, we see that women make up a large majority of participants at the Gram Sabha held at Sawombung Gram Panchayat. Women make up about 80% of all attendees whereas men make up only 20%. Additionally, a lot of women who attend these meetings are from Self Help Groups (SHGs). The SHGs have been vital in creating opportunities for women to engage with their communities by offering members the opportunity for shared decision making, involvement with income-generating activities, and promoting social mobilization among their peers. The evidence shows SHG membership creates both economic empowerments, and also provides valuable pathways for women to be directly involved with democratic processes in their local communities. The data also indicates organized women's groups have the potential to increase the number of women who participate in local governance processes. On the other hand, men maintain significantly lower attendance rates than women, indicating that additional outreach efforts are necessary to include male members and marginalized groups. The evidence supports the premise that SHGs can increase participation rates and build an inclusive participatory democracy within the context of the Gram Sabha.

Conclusion: The finding of this research is that there is an extremely large lack of participation in Gram Sabha meetings within Sawombung Gram Panchayat which has created obstacles to participatory democracy and local government at the grassroots level. Notwithstanding the constitutional and institutional framework, there are

several practical limitations (such as the inability to communicate with all people, unsuitability of meeting times, an impression of the government not being responsive to people's concerns, and declining levels of trust in local institutions) to effective participation in Gram Sabha meetings. Therefore, it is critical to build the Gram Sabha to support accountability, transparency, and inclusive rural development.

References

- Maisnam, G., Watt, H. J., Mondal, S., & Okram, B. (2018). *A study on socio-economic profile of the Gram Panchayat members of Manipur*.
- Singh, R. (2018). Local Governance and Participation in Northeast India. *Economic and Political Weekly*.
- Rao, M., & Sanyal, P. (2010). *Deliberative democracy at the grassroots: Participation and exclusion in Gram Sabha deliberations*
- Singh, A. (2018). *Political polarization and grassroots democratic participation: Evidence from North Eastern India. Studies in Indian Politics*
- Cheriyan, A. C., & Biju, S. K. . *Gram Sabha: The Rusting Weapon*.