

Gram Uday se Bharat Uday Abhiyaan

Villagers witness gram sabha for the first time in their lives

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During the *Gram Uday se Bharat Uday Abhiyaan* (village self-governance campaign) held April 14–24, 2016, Sehgal Foundation data gathered from gram sabhas held in 240 gram panchayats in Mewat district, Haryana, showed that an astounding 90 percent of the villagers in 240 gram panchayats participated for the first time since gram sabha was established in 1995.^{1 2}

The *Gram Uday se Bharat Uday Abhiyaan* was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to generate nationwide efforts to increase social harmony across villages, strengthen panchayati raj, promote rural development, and foster farmers' progress.

What was different about the gram sabhas in Haryana?

First, the national campaign launched by the prime minister sent out the message that gram sabhas are important institutions for village development. Second, the central and state governments reached out in mass media, including newspapers, television, and radio, urging citizens to participate in large numbers. Third, the state government in Haryana asked the district administration to prepare a schedule of gram sabha meetings and allocated responsibility to government officers across departments to be present in the meetings. Finally, and key to success, the people felt the seriousness of the state government in facilitating gram sabhas, hence they participated in large numbers.



Gram sabha in village Nai, Punhana: gram sabhas were organized in large numbers in Mewat (April 14–24, 2016)



A rarity: Sarpanch from scheduled caste led a gram sabha in Kalawari, Tauru.

¹ After the 73rd amendment to the Constitution established panchayati raj institutions, the first election was held in 1995 and gram sabhas began thereafter. Gram panchayats (village councils) are required to hold four gram sabhas (village general body meetings) each year according to recent notifications under Haryana Panchayati Raj Rules.

² Sehgal Foundation's *Sushasan Abhi* (Good Governance Now!) initiative engages citizens to be informed and active participants in their own development. Foundation field staff present in 240 gram sabhas played a crucial role in mobilizing approximately 32,000 villagers to participate in gram sabhas across five blocks in Mewat.

Because many people do not know the meaning and importance of gram sabha, panchayat secretaries, sarpanches (elected village heads), National Rural Livelihood Mission staff, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), anganwadi (government preschool daycare) workers, and Sehgal Foundation together carried out a huge mobilization drive. Door-to-door visits, alerts spread through village chowkidars, and announcements on *masjid* (mosque) loudspeakers encouraged people to participate in the meetings. Community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat, which broadcasts to about 200 villages in Mewat, aired daily messages on Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy and information on the Gram Uday campaign for ten days. The radio then covered the gram sabhas live from fourteen villages.

The campaign witnessed the use of many conventional and unconventional methods to bring people to gram sabha to see something they had not seen before. In some gram panchayats, such as Marora, Nagina block, where people were not gathering despite mobilization efforts, the sarpanch offered refreshing enticements. Riding on his motorcycle, carrying sweets and cold drinks, he announced that if villagers wanted sweets and cold drinks, they should come to the meeting. In Sultanpur gram panchayat, Nagina block, the sarpanch called upon the music and dance group of the public relations department to gather people.

In the gram sabha, panchayat secretaries and government officers explained the importance of gram sabha. Government officers and bank representatives present in a number of the gram sabhas in Nuh, Nagina, and Tauru block, made villagers aware of key government programs for entitlements and *Jan Dhan Yojana* (Prime minister's program for financial inclusion) and *Bima* programs (prime minister's programs for accident and life insurance).

Villagers were asked to share their concerns or problems, which were then listed in the resolutions of the gram sabha. In a number of gram sabhas, villagers identified poor roads, shortage of drinking water, waste management, requirement of toilets, non-payment under *Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awas Yojana* (rural housing program), inclusion in below poverty line list, raising the boundary wall of cremation grounds, and the appointment of school teachers. All these issues were written down in gram sabha resolutions.

Sarpanches, panchayat secretaries, and panches (elected members of village councils) played an active role in the peaceful conduct of the gram sabhas. People and panchayat members who belonged to groups opposed to the present sarpanches did not come to gram sabha, which also helped in warding off conflict. About 40 percent of panchayat members were absent in 240 gram sabhas. In a number of places where government officers were not present, panchayat secretaries moved the blank gram sabha register for signatures of villagers, which villagers protested. In many gram sabhas, educated panches insisted on reading resolutions before signing in the gram sabha registers. Those gram panchayats

with educated sarpanches showed more inclination to organize gram sabha and orient people on government programs. The newly enacted rule for advancement in the education criteria for panchayat elections in Haryana had begun to make a difference in the management of gram sabhas even in Mewat.³

Villagers were pleasantly surprised with the transparency of open discussion and writing of resolutions, which they had not seen before in gram sabha proceedings. In the past, gram sabhas were often held in the home of a sarpanch behind closed doors, gram sabha registers were moved from house to house for signatures of panches and villagers, and then the resolutions were written down.



Women Sarpanch sitting quietly: Her husband (standing) conducting gram sabha in village Nagli, Nuh



A woman sharing her problems in the gram sabha in village Kaliyaki, Tauru

Besides the hits, what were the misses in the ten-day campaign?

Sarpanch patis (husbands of women sarpanches) and *Sarpanch pitas* (fathers of sarpanches) did not permit their wives, daughters, and sons respectively, to speak in the gram sabhas. This illustrates the need for regular capacity building of newly elected representatives and providing them with opportunities to speak in gram sabhas to enable them to overcome societal and cultural constraints. Kalawari gram sabha, Tauru witnessed social constraint when a large number of villagers refused to come to the meeting because the sarpanch belonged to a scheduled caste; however, that sarpanch showed his competency to conduct a successful gram sabha. But in several gram sabhas, scheduled caste sarpanches, panches, and community members could not express themselves, and their demands for development went unlisted in gram sabha resolutions. Even educated women and youth who were elected as sarpanches and panches were found sitting quietly on the floor in gram sabha. Government officers and Sehgal Foundation staff intervened to provide them with chairs and provided the opportunity for them to share their ideas on village development.

³ Haryana Panchayati Raj Amendment Act 2015 brought minimum educational qualifications for eligibility to contest in panchayat elections.

Participation by women in gram sabhas was just 30 percent. In most of the gram sabhas, women sat in a distant corner and remained quiet. In places where women did share their concerns, those concerns were not included in the gram sabha resolutions due lack of support from other men and women. A ray of hope was shown when women of Rathiwas gram sabha, Tauru, managed to not only pass a resolution for removal of a liquor shop in their village but also met the deputy commissioner the following day to request action on the gram sabha resolution.

Absence of government officers in gram sabhas of farther blocks of Mewat—Punhana and Jhirka—25–35 kms from district headquarters disappointed villagers. They felt neglected and thought that their gram sabha resolutions would not be acted upon by the district administration. Another constraint that affected participation was the scheduled timing of gram sabhas at 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. People felt that 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. would have been more suitable for organizing gram sabhas in view of working hours.

Looking ahead . . .

Despite the challenges, villagers were quite satisfied that the work of new gram panchayats in Haryana started on a positive note and they have been able to identify their development priorities in gram sabha resolutions.

There is huge merit in the platform of the gram sabha that ably connects villagers to government officers. The first-ever campaign of its kind has been a top-down process largely run by the political will of central and state governments, but continuing gram sabhas over a period of one to two years holds huge potential in making it a bottom-up process in the gram panchayats, as people start pressuring sarpanches and panchayat members to hold regular gram sabhas. The next steps for every sarpanch and panchayat secretary and district administration are to consider and act on the resolutions. Action taken must be reported back to villagers in the next gram sabha to keep citizens interested in the functioning of gram panchayats.

The noble beginning made under the *Gram Uday Se Bharat Uday Abhiyaan* will only reap results if pursued with unrelenting commitment and will to make panchayats the genuine third tier of local government structure in the country.

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