

Brief Note

National Study on Low Participation in Gram Sabha (LPGS) across States and Union Territories

Background and Significance

Gram Sabha is the foundation of participatory democracy and grassroots governance in rural India. As a constitutional institution under the Panchayati Raj system, it provides citizens with a platform to participate directly in local planning, beneficiary identification, social accountability, monitoring of public services and community decision-making. Effective functioning of Gram Sabha strengthens transparency, accountability, inclusiveness and community ownership of development processes.

Over the years, Panchayati Raj Institutions have emerged as important instruments of decentralized governance and local development. However, the effectiveness of local self-governance depends not only on institutional structures but also on the extent to which citizens actively participate in Gram Sabha processes. Meaningful participation strengthens democratic accountability, improves local planning and enhances responsiveness of local institutions to community needs and priorities.

Recognizing the importance of strengthening participatory local governance, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj entrusted the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), Hyderabad, with the task of undertaking a National Study on Low Participation in Gram Sabha (LPGS) across States and Union Territories. The study represents one of the largest field-based assessments undertaken on citizen participation in Gram Sabha and seeks to generate evidence-based insights for strengthening grassroots democracy and improving the effectiveness of Gram Sabha institutions.

Objectives

The study was undertaken to:

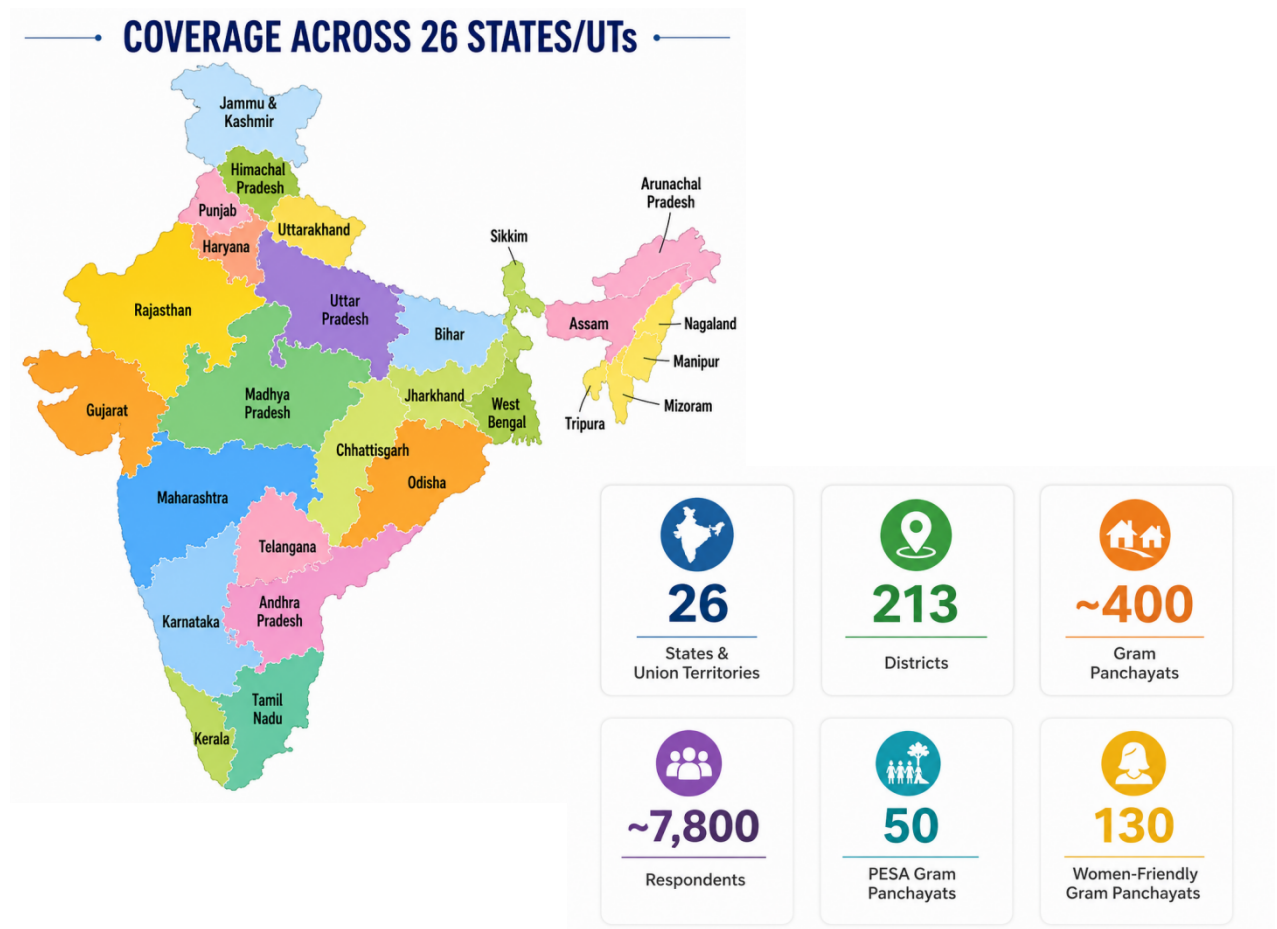
- Analyse factors influencing participation in Gram Sabha meetings.
- Examine participation patterns among different social and demographic groups.
- Assess governance, institutional, communication and operational factors affecting citizen engagement.
- Identify barriers affecting participation and inclusiveness.
- Document innovative practices adopted for improving community participation.
- Generate recommendations for strengthening participatory local governance and Gram Sabha functioning.

Coverage

The study adopted a decentralized field-based assessment approach covering diverse geographical, socio-economic and governance contexts across the country. The assessment covered 26 States and Union Territories and approximately 400 Gram

Panchayats, including 50 PESA Gram Panchayats and 130 Women-Friendly Gram Panchayats.

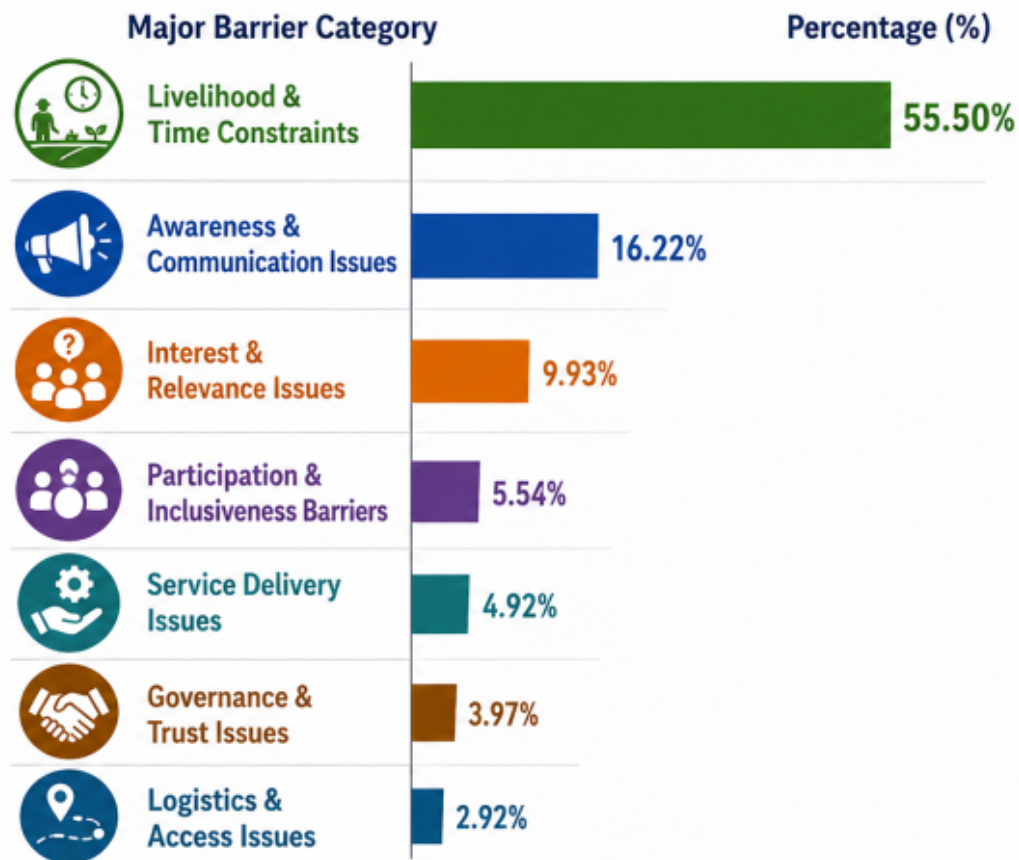
Nearly 7,800 respondents participated in the assessment, including Gram Sabha members, elected representatives, Panchayat officials, Self-Help Group members, community leaders and other stakeholders. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, stakeholder consultations, field observations and community interactions.



Key Findings

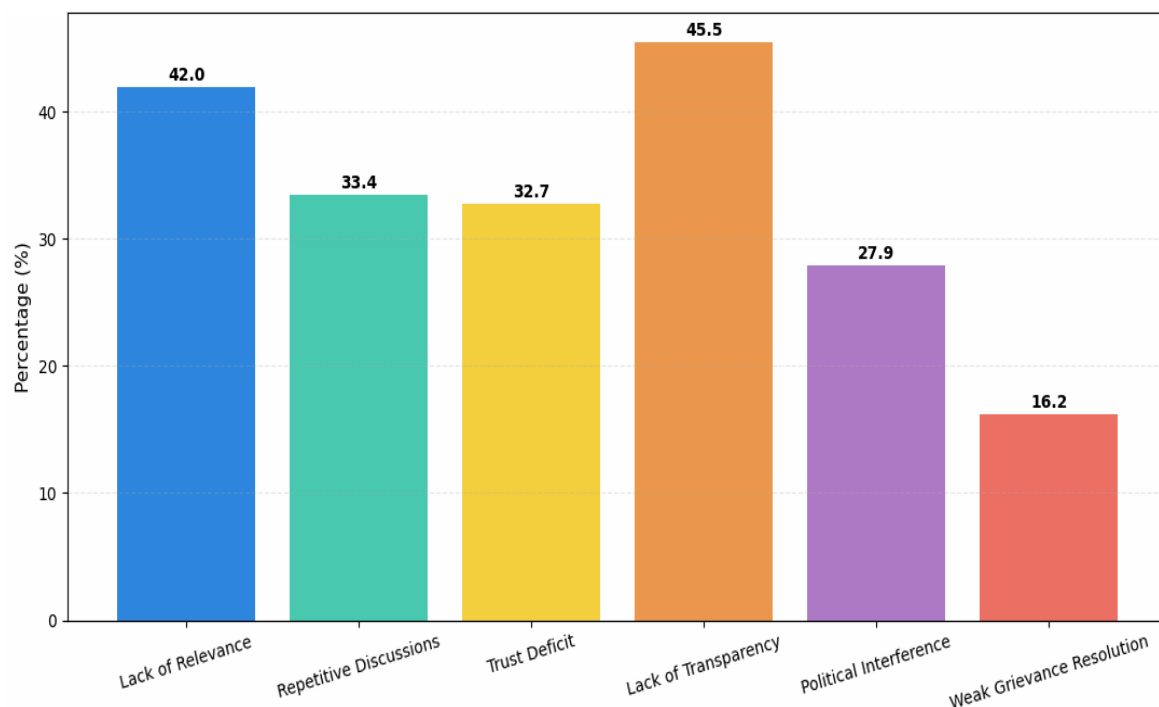
- The study demonstrates that low participation in Gram Sabha is multidimensional, influenced by socio-economic, institutional, governance and behavioural factors rather than a single underlying cause.
- Livelihood and time-related constraints emerged as the single largest barrier to participation (55.5%), followed by awareness and communication issues (16.22%), highlighting the need for both livelihood-sensitive scheduling and stronger citizen outreach.

Figure : National Pattern of Participation Barriers in Gram Sabha Meetings



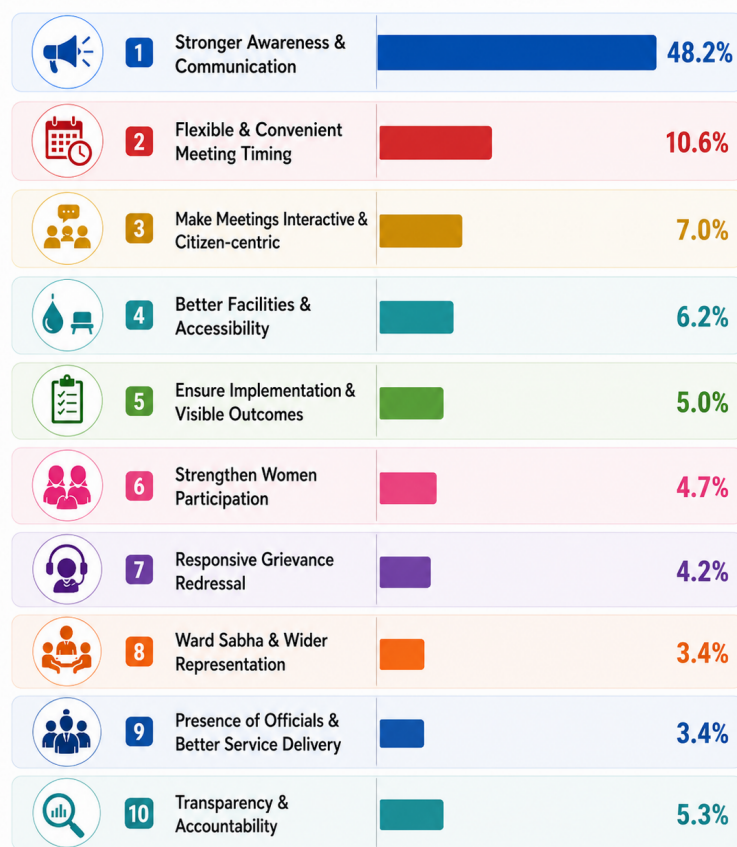
- Busy work schedules (41.74%) and agricultural activities (30.26%) emerged as the most significant occupational constraints affecting participation in Gram Sabha meetings.
- Migrant households (17.61%), youth (16.73%), elderly citizens (15.80%) and women (13.40%) were identified among the least represented groups in Gram Sabha processes.
- The study revealed an important distinction between awareness of Gram Sabha meetings and understanding of Gram Sabha processes. While awareness regarding the conduct of Gram Sabha meetings was generally high, knowledge relating to citizen rights, quorum requirements, decision-making processes and the institutional role of Gram Sabha was comparatively lower in several areas.
- Beyond these barriers, the study identified an emerging phenomenon termed 'Gram Sabha Participation Fatigue', wherein repeated meetings without visible outcomes, unresolved grievances, repetitive discussions and limited follow-up on decisions gradually reduce public enthusiasm for participation.
- The findings indicate that participation fatigue is primarily driven by transparency concerns (45.46%), lack of relevance of discussions (42.0%), repetitive discussions (33.4%), trust deficit (32.7%), political interference (27.9%) and weak grievance resolution (16.2%). Together, these factors gradually reduce public confidence and willingness to participate in Gram Sabha.

Figure : Emerging Challenges to Sustained Citizen Engagement in Gram Sabha



- The study suggests that citizens increasingly evaluate Gram Sabha not merely by the conduct of meetings, but by the relevance of discussions, responsiveness of institutions, transparency in decision-making and visible implementation of resolutions.
- Respondents identified awareness and community mobilisation as the most effective measures for improving participation. Awareness and publicity (48.2%) emerged as the highest priority, followed by door-to-door mobilisation (22.2%), convenient meeting timings (10.6%) and more interactive Gram Sabha meetings (7.0%).

Figure : Respondant Suggested Measures for improving Participation in Gram Sabha



- Respondants also emphasized greater transparency, visible implementation of decisions, effective grievance redressal, women's participation, improved accessibility and regular participation of officials as essential measures for sustaining public confidence in Gram Sabha.
- The study further documented several innovative practices across States and Union Territories—including SHG-led mobilisation, thematic Gram Sabhas, Bal Sabhas, women-centric initiatives and technology-enabled communication systems—which provide practical models for strengthening participatory local governance.

Major Policy Recommendations

- Launch a National Gram Sabha Awareness, Procedural Literacy and Mobilisation Mission to strengthen citizen awareness, procedural understanding and democratic participation.
- Institutionalize structured pre-Gram Sabha mobilisation through Ward Members, Self-Help Groups, frontline workers, youth groups and community institutions to ensure wider citizen outreach.

- Promote livelihood-sensitive scheduling of Gram Sabha meetings by considering agricultural cycles, local work patterns, migration realities and community preferences.
- Strengthen Mahila Sabhas, Ward Sabhas, Youth Sabhas and other inclusive participation platforms to improve representation of women, SCs, STs, youth and other vulnerable groups.
- Institutionalize Action Taken Reports (ATRs), grievance tracking systems, public review mechanisms and follow-up processes to improve transparency, accountability and public trust.
- Ensure advance public disclosure of Gram Sabha agendas, beneficiary lists, budgets, development priorities and implementation status through both physical and digital platforms.
- Strengthen convergence between Panchayati Raj Institutions and line departments to improve service delivery, grievance redressal and responsiveness to community concerns.
- Leverage digital technologies including SMS alerts, WhatsApp groups, IVRS systems, Panchayat digital notice boards and eGramSwaraj-linked communication systems to enhance citizen engagement and participation.
- Promote citizen-centric and outcome-oriented Gram Sabha processes by encouraging meaningful discussions, local problem-solving, visible follow-up actions and community-led decision-making.

Conclusion

The National Study on Low Participation in Gram Sabha demonstrates that strengthening participation requires moving beyond attendance-focused approaches towards improving awareness, procedural literacy, inclusion, transparency, responsiveness and visible governance outcomes. The findings underscore that sustained citizen engagement depends not only on mobilizing people to attend meetings but also on ensuring that Gram Sabha remains relevant, trusted, responsive and capable of addressing community priorities. The study provides an evidence-based roadmap for strengthening Gram Sabha as a vibrant institution of participatory democracy, local accountability and community-led development across rural India.