

SAMRAS IN GRAM PANCHAYATS OF GUJARAT: UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY BY MEANS OF CONSENSUS?

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Abstract

Among the 10,118 Gram Panchayats (GP) in Gujarat that were going to general/mid-term elections and by-elections, 1,267 were declared 'samras gams (villages)' on December 7, 2021, the last day of withdrawal of nomination. Samras gams are those villages where a sarpanch and all the ward members are chosen by consensus by not going to polls. They become eligible to receive monetary benefits for the development works. If the choice of the people in the elections held in two decades since the inception of the scheme is observed, it suggests that just about 20 per cent of the GPs prefer samras. The major criticism of the concept has been that government-backed financial incentives undermine the concept of free and fair elections. Besides, it is found that the elites who have a grip on the village economy in the respective GP constituencies decide to go for samras, which indirectly results in the denial of political rights to the socio-economically weaker section of people. The political parties may have introduced the scheme with the best of intentions to halt the regular reporting of violence erupting after the elections in the villages and affecting the development process in the GPs. However, after weighing the merits and demerits of the scheme on the ground, scrapping it altogether appears to be an ideal move to continue with the democratic spirit at the local level of governance.

Keywords: Samras, Gram Panchayats, Elections, Gujarat.

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Views are personal.

Introduction

Among the 10,118 Gram Panchayats (GP) that were going to general/midterm elections and by-elections, 1,267 were declared 'samras gams (villages)' on December 7, 2021, the last day of withdrawal of nomination (The Indian Express, 2021a). According to the State Election Commission, in 6,476 other GPs, 473 Sarpanches and 27400 ward members were declared elected uncontested (The Indian Express, 2021b). The Samras gams are those villages where a sarpanch and all the ward members are chosen by consensus by not going to polls. They become eligible to receive monetary benefits for the development works. As per the latest announcement, the polling booths where candidates are decided by consensus without elections receive Rs. 25,000 from the Development Commissioner of the state (The Indian Express, 2021b). The Gujarat Panchayat, Rural Housing and Rural Development provide financial incentives to GPs opting for samras on behalf of the government.

In addition to these incentives, various community development works related to water, roads, school buildings, primary health centres and drainage systems are extended to the samras GPs under the scheme (Government of Gujarat, u.d.-a). The three-tier structure in Gujarat consists of 33 Zilla (District) Panchayats, 247 Panchayat Samities or Taluka Panchayats, and 14,017 GPs (there are 18,584 revenue villages) (Government of Gujarat, u.d.-b). The news reports, government documents and available research literature used for writing this manuscript is a review of the elections held for GPs in Gujarat as mentioned above. In the late 1950s when the state governments started to adopt Panchayati Raj Institutions as a governance system in the country, many scholars wrote extensively on the subject. On the issue of adopting a method for electing the representatives for the panchayats, Varadan (1962: 634) stressed the fact that "Democracy is based on the concept that the will of the electorate can be expressed through the ballot box and the representatives so elected shall stand accountable to the people." Given the above,

this discussion is relevant because it probes whether the tenets of democracy are compromised, particularly when the state government proactively promotes consensus elections with monetary incentives for the GPs opting for the scheme.

Idea of Samras

The state-backed samras model in Gujarat was implemented in 2002 (The Indian Express, 2016). The idea behind this initiative was mainly to contain enmity among the people in the villages that invariably resulted from local elections. In precise words, it was "to encourage amity and harmony in the village and to encourage dispute-free villages" (Government of Gujarat, 2020: 26). The states like Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab and Telangana have all experimented with the consensus method of election/ selection in the Panchayats (The Hindu, 2021).

The kind of financial incentives extended by the government separate Gujarat from other states in 'sustaining' the initiative (for details see Table 1). The extension of Rs. 25,000 to each pooling booth where elections were not required due to candidates chosen uncontested is an example of how the government in Gujarat pro-actively promotes the scheme to attract people's interest in it. However, in 2021, Andhra Pradesh government announced financial incentives for the GPs choosing its candidates including its sarpanches unanimously on the lines of Gujarat through a government order (The Hindu, 2021).

The Debate

If the preference of the people in the elections held in two decades since the inception of the scheme is observed, it suggests that just about 20 per cent of GPs opted for samras. Interestingly, in the general/main elections held in 2001-02, 2006-07, 2011-12 and 2016-17, the people opting for samras were 21.4 per cent, 21.7 per cent, 16.9 per cent, and 11.9 per cent, respectively. In the recently concluded elections, it is confined to only 12.5 per cent (Table 2). The trend suggests that the

Table 1*Samras Scheme for the GPs in Gujarat*

S. No.	Opting for Samras	Population	Grants (in Rs.) for Mixed Members	Grants (in Rs.) for All Women Members
1.	First Time	Up to 5000	2,00,000	3,00,000
		Above 5000	3,00,000	5,00,000
2.	Second Time	Up to 5000	2,50,000	3,75,000
		Above 5000	3,75,000	6,25,000
3.	Third Time	Up to 5000	3,12,000	4,68,000
		Above 5000	4,68,000	7,56,000
4.	Fourth Time	Up to 5000	3,50,000	5,00,000
		Above 5000	5,00,000	8,00,000

Source: Government of Gujarat (2020).

Note: The latest announcement earmarks incentives of up to a maximum Rs. 11 lakh and Rs. 16 lakh for the mixed member and all women candidates respectively for the GPs having a population between 5001 and 25000 opting samras for the fifth time (The Indian Express, 2021b).

Table 2*Break-Up of Samras GPs in Gujarat between 2001-2019*

S. No.	Year	Total No. of GPs	Elections Held GPs	Samras GPs	All-Women GPs
1.	2001-02	13324	10467	2857 (21.4)	17 (0.6)
2.	2002-03	2301	1680	621 (27.0)	0 (0.0)
3.	2003-04	2009	1586	423 (21.1)	0 (0.0)
4.	2004-05	82	68	14 (17.1)	0 (0.0)
5.	2006-07	13219	10355	2864 (21.7)	13 (0.5)
6.	2007-08	2718	2004	714 (26.3)	5 (0.7)
7.	2008-09	1861	1429	432 (23.2)	4 (0.9)
8.	2009-10	901	702	199 (22.1)	2 (1.0)
9.	2010-11	124	0	124 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
10.	2011-12	12528	10405	2123 (16.9)	250 (11.8)
11.	2012-13	2150	1728	422 (19.6)	71 (16.8)
12.	2013-14	1749	1427	322 (18.4)	39 (12.1)
13.	2016-17	11663	10279	1384 (11.9)	163 (11.8)
14.	2017-18	4099	3364	735 (17.9)	74 (10.1)
15.	2018-19	422	312	110 (26.1)	7 (6.4)
Total		69150	55806	13344 (19.3)	645 (4.8)

Source: Government of Gujarat (u.d.-c).

Note: Figures in parentheses are the percentages of the actual count prepared by the author.

preference for samras is declining. In addition to it, extra rewards for all-women samras Panchayats has not appealed to the people, as only 4.8 per cent of total samras GPs so far have preferred the leadership of women. It only emphasises that there is a need for the government to create political awareness among women about the importance of their participation in the decision-making process in GPs. Women's empowerment helps in taking forward the overall development agenda at the local level more effectively.

Following the implementation of samras scheme in the state, the discourse over the merits and demerits of the scheme always existed. The argument is made in favour of it because it saves money in conducting elections, which otherwise can be utilised for the development of a village. This is countered by highlighting the importance of an individual's voting rights, which is fundamental in a democratic system for which any amount of money spent on conducting elections is considered meagre. In this milieu, the money spent during the elections by the stakeholders involved in it is ignored. Bandi, (2021) in his study, reports about a member of an elite household who ensured consensus election of "all women candidates" in his GP narrating his experience. According to that member, it was monetarily a costly affair to keep each voter in good humour to preserve the constituency uncontested. The voters and their families were given special feasts and other rewards from the day of the announcement of elections to the last minute of filing nomination. This proves that opting for samras by a GP might save a small amount of money for the government exchequer, but not for the contesting candidates and their supporters. The involvement of huge money in local elections is now a common phenomenon in India (Aiyappa, 2020). It applies to both situations - contested and uncontested.

Similarly, it is argued that 'samras', which means harmony in the local language, helps in ensuring peace if elections are not held and a candidate is chosen by consensus. The counterview presented is that, if elections cause a disruption to normal life in any area, it must be

treated as a law and order issue and not as a fallout of democratic exercise. Interestingly, the discontent appeared to remain in both situations. A good number of people in samras GPs were reportedly unhappy with those who influenced people in their village to impose samras on them. It denied them a chance of testing their political aspirations through secret ballots. On the other side, where normal elections were held, the people who opposed samras were cursed, ill-treated and boycotted. They were held responsible for denying extra funds to their GPs (Bandi, 2021).

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment was perceived to strengthen democracy at the grassroots level. The extension of decision-making power to the people belonging to the underprivileged sections, including women, was envisaged to take rural society towards the realisation of a welfare state in a real sense. However, with the advent of the concept of samras, the spirit of democracy appears to be undermined. It dents further when the government-backed financial incentives remain the primary attraction than any other socio-economic merit. This also means that those GPs preferring democratic means of elections are punished because they do not get extra grants. Moreover, it is repeatedly observed that the elites who have a grip on the village economy in the respective GP constituencies not only take the decision to go for samras but also choose the names for the post of Sarpanch and her/his deputy and also the ward members. As a result, the common villagers in many places find it difficult to oppose the decision. Instead, they end up pretending to support the choice.

Most often, it is the socio-economically weaker sections of people who happen to be the majority in the country end up deprived of basic political rights despite having numbers on their side if the constituencies are not reserved for them to make it to the position of a ward member or a sarpanch. Taking away the advantage of the majority in the garb of 'incentives' for the Panchayats through ideas like samras amounts to an act of gross injustice to them.

Conclusion

According to Shah (2011), it is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government that has been promoting the samras scheme vigorously in the state since it was launched with monetary rewards for those opting for consensus election of candidates in GPs. At the same time, he points out that the Indian National Congress (INC) was at the helm of affairs in 1991 when the concept was first floated in the state. Hence, the latter could not oppose the same. Ganguly (2013: 8) calls it 'new wine in old bottle'. Nevertheless, the political parties claim that the schemes like samras also known as Binharif (uncontested/unanimous election) locally have been introduced with the best

of intentions to halt the regular reporting of violence erupting after the elections in the villages and affecting the development process in the GP. However, after weighing the merits and demerits of the scheme on the ground, scrapping the 'consensus' election/selection for local governments altogether appears to be an ideal move to uphold the democratic spirit. National parties like BJP and INC in the state need to recognise that many notable members in their parties have risen from humble backgrounds to occupy the country's top positions in the government. It was possible only because India is a democratic nation and it provides its citizens a right to contest and participate in free and fair elections.

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