



## **Participatory Panchayati Raj Institutions and Awareness of Rural Development Programs in Bihar**

**Md. Rashid and Dr. Anjan Sen**



### **Abstract**

*This present paper examines the level of people's participation in panchayat activities and level of people's awareness about rural development programs. The study is done against the background of the Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992, and Bihar Panchayati Raj Act, 1993 and 2006, both of which aim to empower the rural people by strengthening the Gram Sabha. Gram Sabha happens to be the heart or the core of the panchayati raj system of local self-governance. The study is entirely based on a primary survey conducted in four villages of Atri Block in Gaya District of Bihar, which is among the least developed and most backward districts of India.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The village problem has to be solved by the villagers alone - Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi's idea of people's participation in development of rural areas is still applicable to Indian villages. Despite making *Panchayati-Raj* a constitutional body and implementation of a large number of development schemes, they have not achieved much needed success in rural development. Hence, there is a need to make rural people more active and participatory in rural development. This was realized by giving legal status to *Gram Sabha* through Constitutions' 73rd Amendment Act. The present paper discusses the issue of people's participation in rural planning and development through *Gram Sabha*, and people's awareness about rural development programs.

The study is based on primary data collected through structured questionnaires and group discussions, which is supported by secondary data collected from the records maintained by various institutions of central, state and local self-government such as District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), Block Development Office (BDO), District Census Handbook (DCH), and the *Panchayati Raj* Institution (PRI) records. Households were selected through voter list of the village on the basis of simple stratified random sampling technique. A total of 45 households were selected with the help of random number table, fifteen each from general castes, Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs).

*Mr. Md. Rashid, presently pursuing Ph.D in Geography from Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. He obtained M.Phil in Geography from University of Delhi and MA in Geography from Aligarh Muslim University. Email: rashidgeog@gmail.com.*

*Dr. Anjan Sen, presently Assistant Professor in Geography at Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. He obtained Ph.D from IIT Delhi, Master of Planning in Regional Planning from SPA, and MA in Geography from JNU. Email: dr.anjansen@gmail.com*



It is commonly accepted that rural development has three actors i.e. officials, elected representatives and villagers. Therefore, primary data has been collected from all of them to know the exact situation of program implementation, and role of *Panchayats* in the development of villages. Question was also asked to find out what rural people meant by development.

## 2. THE STUDY AREA

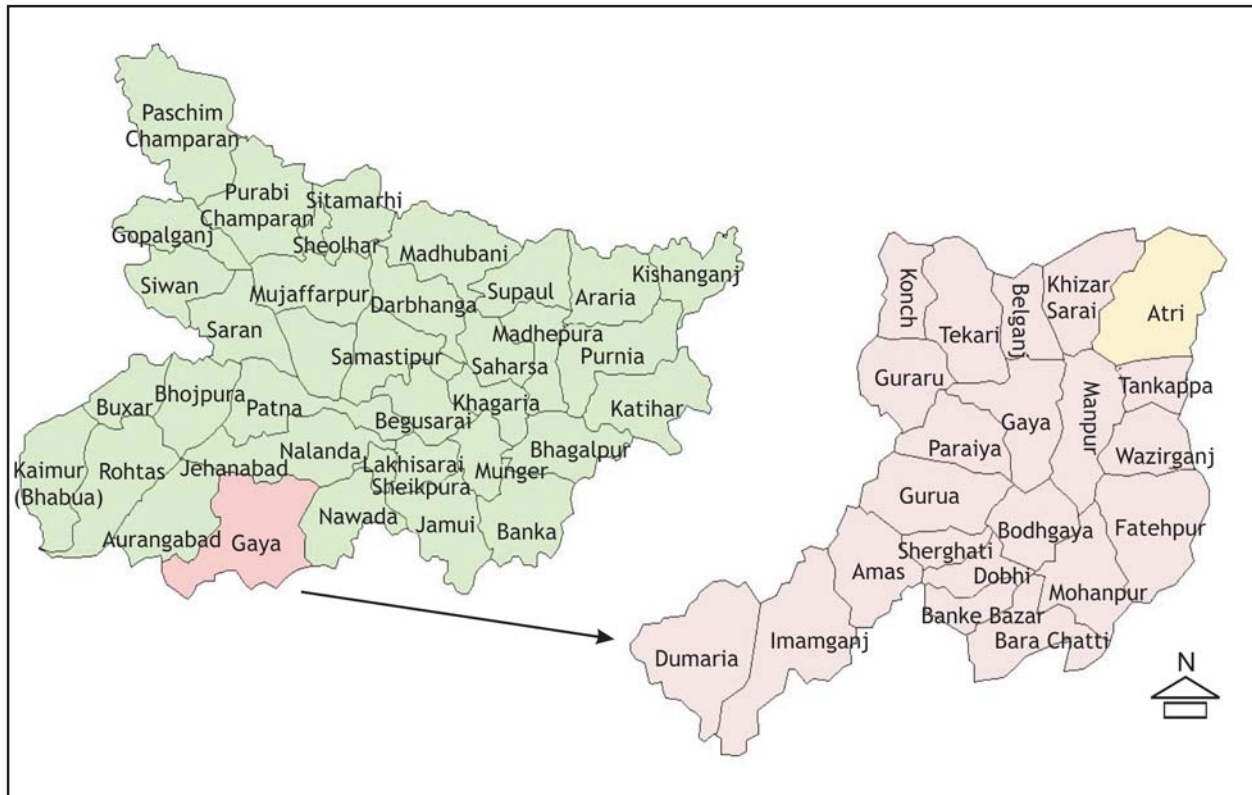
Bihar, historically among the most civilized and best administered states in India, is today one of the country's most impoverished and backward states. Its infrastructure including roads, power or communication networks are the poorest in India. A majority of its population, over 90 percent works on land and produces food enough to meet the immediate requirements of their families. After six decades of independence, Bihar is economically the most backward states in India having the lowest per capita income among all the states. Its per capita income (Net GDP at factor cost at current prices) stands at a mere Rs.2,904 as against Rs. 5,781 for India and Rs. 9,643 for Punjab (CMIE, 1994). The state also has the lowest literacy rate among the major states with 47.5 percent against 100 percent literacy in Kerala.

One of the obvious reasons for the economic backwardness and poverty of Bihar is its high population growth. The average per capita operational holding in the state is 0.9 hectare (1985-1986) as against 1.7 hectare for India and 2.8 hectares in the Punjab. In addition, the natural productivity of agricultural land is very low. Bihar has an area of 94,163 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 82,878,796 as per 2001 census. After the separation of Jharkhand in 2000, Bihar became an agricultural dominant state with 87.5 percent of its population living in rural areas, almost all of whom are engaged in farming activities. It is among the poorest states of the country with 43 percent of its people living below poverty line.

Gaya is a city of great antiquity, being the oldest cities of the world, having seen many ups and downs of history. Today Gaya is one of the poorest and among the most backward districts of Bihar (Planning Commission, 1997). It is located in the southern part of the state, and is bounded by Jehanabad and Nalanda districts in the north, Nawada district in the east, Aurangabad district in the west, and Palamau and Hazaribagh districts of Jharkhand state in the south. The district was created in 1865 prior to which it was a part of Behar subdivision of Patna district. In 1973, Nawada and Aurangabad subdivisions of the district were separated into independent districts. Simultaneously, a new district of Jehanabad was also carved out (Fig. 1).

The district forms part of the Ganga plains but its southern and south-eastern parts are hilly being an extension of Chhotanagpur plateau. In 2001, the district had a population of 3,464,983 (4.2 percent of the state), spread over an area of 4,976 km<sup>2</sup> (5.3 percent of the state), giving a density of 696 persons per sq km, compared

**Fig. 1 Bihar State - Location of Gaya District and Atri Block**



to 880 per sq km for the state. The district is overwhelmingly rural at 86.3 percent; while 51.6 percent are males, giving a sex ratio of 937 females per 1,000 males, which is higher than the state's 921 females per 1,000 males. The district's literacy levels are higher than that of the state - total literacy 51.1 percent, male literacy 63.8 percent and female literacy 37.4 percent. SC constitutes 30 percent of the total population, while ST is at negligible 0.1 percent.

### 2.1 Atri Block of Gaya District

Atri is one of the 24 blocks constituting Gaya district. With an area of 39,614 hectares (39.6 km<sup>2</sup>), the block is 100 percent rural comprising of 144 villages under 25 *panchayats*. The chief physical feature of this block is a hill towards the east. The topography is undulating with a gentle slope. All the *panchayats* have large forest cover. There are no major river systems but a rivulet divides the block into a hilly eastern part and a flat western part. The block had a population of 443,470 (6.4 percent of the district) in 2001 of which 70 percent were General and OBC, and 30 percent were SC with negligible ST. The sex ratio is 944 females per 1,000 males, i.e. 51.4 percent males and 48.6 percent females. Literacy rate stands at 36 percent (males 48 percent and females 23 percent). Poor literacy rate is partially explained due to paucity of educational facilities. The block has 141 primary schools, 29



middle schools, 11 secondary schools, and only one senior-secondary school. Further, the block has 11 primary health sub-centers, 7 primary health centers, one health centre, and six hospitals. Only 17 percent of the roads are *pucca* or surfaced.

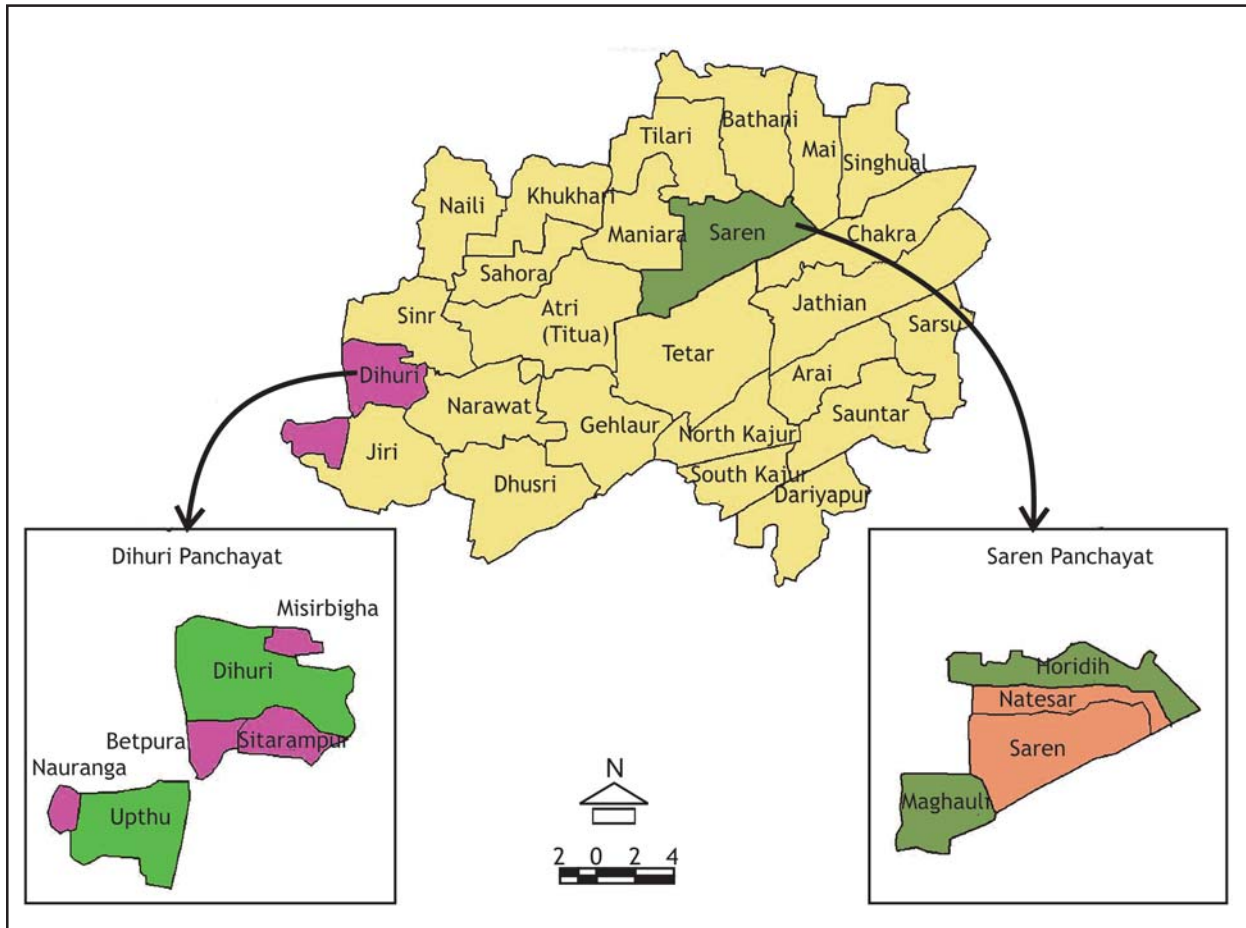
Social structure of the block is fractured along caste lines. Relative positions in the caste hierarchy determine social relationships, behavioral patterns and cultural norms. Socio-economic structure revolves around land ownership. Land reforms in Bihar have had limited impact and land distribution is skewed in favor of few. Owners of large holdings belong to upper castes with some OBCs. The lower castes are small land owners or landless laborers. Although the lower castes form numerical majority in any village, they reside outside the main village in *tolas* i.e. settlement clusters or hamlets.

Economic and social inequalities are interlinked. The power structure is concentrated in the hands of the dominant castes, and people with political or muscle power. They dominate the activities of the village as well as their own community. These people control the flow of resources and technology coming from outside, and appropriate all the benefits meant for the weaker sections. The phenomenon of the dominant caste and dominant personalities among all castes is a common feature to all villages in this region.

The lower castes face constant discrimination in their day to day life. Among them the women are worst victims. Without any asset base, and several social disabilities, they are unable to sustain any economic activity, and have to depend on others for means of livelihood. Consequently, they are exploited, and live at subsistence levels without any savings. Poverty is directly related to land holdings as agriculture and its allied sectors are the main source of income. There are some small scale industries which provide employment to a limited workforce. Trading is limited to agricultural and forest products.

In 2001, less than one third i.e. 32.3 percent of the total population was workers, men at 44.3 percent and women at 19.7 percent. However, the block's workforce participation rate is higher than that of the state. The workers are either main (36.7 percent) or marginal (63.3 percent). The main workers include 14.3 percent cultivators, 10.5 percent agricultural laborers, 3.1 percent in household industry, and 8.8 percent in other activities. Among the marginal workers, 95 percent were female. Irrigation facilities are poor. Total area irrigated from all sources was 26,820 hectares (26.8 km<sup>2</sup>), which is 67.7 percent of the total geographical area. Important sources of irrigation are wells, tube-wells, ponds, tanks, and rivers. The block is connected by a state highway to the district headquarter Gaya, which is the only means of communication. It is connected with few rural roads, which serve major villages and markets. There is no national highway.

Fig. 2 Atri Block - Location of Dihuri and Saren Gram Panchayats



Atri Block consists of 25 Panchayats, of which two Dihuri and Saren has been selected for the study. The selection has been done on the basis of physical features and connectivity to district and block headquarters. Further, for more intensive study, two villages each have been selected from the two Panchayats of Dihuri and Upthu, and Saren and Natesar respectively. Here the selection has been arrived at on the basis of population and the village to which the headman or Mukhia of the Panchayat belongs (Fig. 2).

### 2.2 Dihuri Gram Panchayat

Dihuri Gram Panchayat comprises six villages, and has an area of 1,069 hectares. It has plain topography with a river on the eastern margins. It is 20 km from the district headquarters and 10 km from the block headquarters. In 2001 its population was 8,614, of whom 29 percent were SC and remaining were General and OBC. There was no

Table 1 Population of Dihuri Gram Panchayat, 2001

Categories	Male	Female	Total	%
General	3, 201	2, 916	6, 117	71.0
SC	1, 260	1, 237	2, 497	29.0
ST	0	0	0	0.0
Total	4, 461	4, 153	8, 614	100.0

Source: District Census Handbook, Gaya, 2001



ST in this *Panchayat* (see Table 1). The sex ratio was in favor of male i.e. 52 percent males and 48 percent females.

Agriculture is the major source of income and livelihood of the people. Irrigation facilities in this *panchayat* are relatively good, and the total area irrigated is 1,015 hectares. Important sources of irrigation are wells, tube wells, rivers and lakes. There is no culturable wasteland and forest in this *Panchayat*. The *Panchayat* is well connected by all weather motorable roads to both the district and block headquarters. The road was repaired last year under *Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana* (PMGSY).

### 2.3 Saren Gram Panchayat

*Saren Gram Panchayat* has four villages with an area of 1,788 hectares. It has undulating topography comprising of low hills interspersed with valleys. The *panchayat* has several springs. Part of Rajgir, the capital of the historic Mauryan Empire, the *panchayat* has several ancient habitations. It also finds extensive mention in travelogues of Francis Buchanan, who had traveled across the Gaya district in 1811-1812. Last year some idols from the Mauryan period were excavated. In 2001 census, *Saren Gram Panchayat* had recorded a population of 11,614 of whom 25.5 percent were SC, 0.1 percent ST and remaining 74.4 percent were OBC and General (Table 2). The sex ratio was in favor of male i.e. 51 percent male and 49 percent females.

Table 2 Population of *Saren Gram Panchayat*, 2001

Categories	Male	Female	Total	%
General	4, 406	4, 229	8, 635	74.4
SC	1, 524	1, 438	2, 962	25.5
ST	7	10	17	0.1
Total	5, 937	5, 677	11, 614	100

Source: District Census Handbook, Gaya, 2001

Agriculture is the principal economic activity of the people. Some people of SC and ST community generate income from minor forest products. Large parts of the *panchayat* are under forest (336 hectares or 19 percent), culturable wasteland (138 hectares or 8 percent), or not-available for cultivation (247 hectares or 14 percent). The *panchayat* has poor irrigation facilities compared to other *panchayats* in the block. Total irrigated area from all sources is 894 hectares or 50 percent, the important sources of irrigation being ponds, tanks and wells. The *panchayat* is not connected with all weather motorable roads, which contributes to its backwardness. People have to cover a distance of 6-7 km to catch a bus.

### 3. DIHURI, UPTHU, SAREN AND NATESAR VILLAGES

Four villages were selected for intensive study - Dihuri and Uptthu from *Dihuri Gram Panchayat*, and Saren and Natesar from *Saren Gram Panchayat*. The total geographical area of the study area is 1,828 hectares, of which 1,433 hectares (78 percent) is Net Sown Area, 144 hectares (8 percent) is Forest, 59 hectares (3 percent) is Culturable Wasteland, and 192 hectares (11 percent) not Available for Cultivation.



**Table 3 Land Use Pattern, 2001 (in Hectares)**

Gram Panchayats	Villages	Forest	Culturable Wasteland	Not Available for Cultivation	Net Sown Area (NSA)	Total Geographical Area
Dihuri	Dihuri	0.0	0.0	0.0	554.7	554.7
	Upthu	0.0	0.0	0.0	335.0	335.0
	Total	0.0	0.0	0.0	889.7	889.7
Saren	Saren	121.4	44.4	181.7	323.7	671.2
	Natesar	22.2	14.8	10.5	219.3	266.8
	Total	143.6	59.2	192.2	543.0	938.0
Grand Total	143.6	59.2	192.2	1,432.7	1,827.7	

Source: District Census Handbook, Gaya, 2001

There are significant differences between the villages of Dihuri and *Saren Gram Panchayats*. Net Sown Area comprises 100 percent of both the villages of Dihuri *Gram Panchayat*, while it constitutes 58 percent in *Saren Gram Panchayat* (Table 3). *Saren Gram Panchayat's* land use is more diversified, with large tracts of land under forest and culturable wasteland.

Dihuri and Saren, respectively with a population of 5,072 and 3,294 are the largest villages within their *panchayats*, and hence are *panchayat* headquarters (Table 4). The two villages of Dihuri *Panchayat* have a combined literacy rate of 37 percent (male 50 percent and female 22 percent), compared to 33 percent (male 46 percent and female 21 percent) for the two villages of *Saren Panchayat*. There is a high variation in literacy levels between the villages in both the *panchayats*.

In the two villages of Dihuri *Panchayat*, there were 25 public hand pumps of which 20 were in working condition. Among the two villages of *Saren Panchayat*, 9 of the 12 hand pumps were functional. *Saren Panchayat* has more wells than hand pumps as the villages have undulating topography and a hilly tract, which makes it difficult to install hand pumps by ring machines.

**Table 4 Distribution of Population by Caste and Sex, 2001**

Gram Panchayat	Villages	General		Scheduled Caste		Scheduled Tribe		Total
		M	F	M	F	M	F	
Dihuri	Dihuri	2,085	1,852	580	555	0	0	5,072
	Upthu	850	789	389	386	0	0	2,414
	Total	2,935	2,641	969	941	0	0	7,486
Saren	Saren	1175	1265	427	427	0	0	3,294
	Natesar	1111	1010	268	224	10	7	2,630
	Total	2,286	2,275	695	651	10	7	5,924
Grand Total		5,221	4,916	1,664	1,592	10	7	13,410

Source: District Census Handbook, Gaya, 2001



All the four villages have primary school. While two villages, one in each *panchayat* have middle schools and Dihuri Village has a high school. There is no high school in the Saren panchayat and the nearest is located more than 10 km away, which remains inaccessible due to absence of transport facility. Saren Village has a museum.

### 3.1 Profile of Respondents

The household schedule was canvassed on 180 respondents from the four selected villages. Of the 180 respondents, 38 percent were beneficiaries of a rural

**Table 5 Rural Development Schemes - Beneficiaries by Caste**

Caste	General	OBC	SC	Total
Dihuri	2	5	10	17
Upthu	2	6	13	21
Saren	0	4	14	18
Natesar	0	3	8	11
Total	4	18	45	67

Source: Primary Field Survey, 2006

development scheme, while 62 percent were non-beneficiaries. Among the 67 beneficiaries, 67 percent were SC (Table 5). Of the 67 beneficiaries, 40 benefited from *Indira Awas Yojana* (IAY), 25 from *Annapurna Scheme*, and 3 each from *Jawahar Rozgar Yojana* (JRY) and *Antoyadaya Scheme*. Four beneficiaries benefited from more than one scheme, and there were few instances of beneficiaries having received benefits from the same scheme more than once. About 57 percent respondents fell Below Poverty Line (BPL).

Owing to social restrictions and traditions i.e. males not allowed free interaction with females, thus 92 percent of the respondents were male. This explains dominance of males among the respondents. Among the respondents, 49 percent were illiterate, and 51 percent were literates. The

**Table 6 Occupational Status of the Respondents**

Village	Farmer	Agricultural Laborers	Secondary Workers	Govt. Service	Others
Dihuri	33%	29%	20%	11%	7%
Upthu	24%	51%	15%	1%	9%
Saren	24%	35%	15%	18%	8%
Natesar	24%	36%	18%	11%	11%
Total	27%	38%	17%	10%	8%

Source: Primary Field Survey, 2006

education level of 91 literate respondents was - Primary (37), Middle (30), High or Senior Secondary (7), Graduates (14) and Postgraduate (3). Among the respondents, 120 (67 percent) were Hindus and 60 (33 percent) were Muslims. The age structure of the respondents was as follows: 15 percent below 30 years, 28 percent between 30-40 years, 31 percent between 40-50 years, 22 percent between 50-60 years, and 4 percent above 60 years. The occupational structure of the respondents was as

follows - Farmers (48), Agricultural Laborers (68), Secondary Workers (31), Government Service (18), Unemployed (6), and Students (9) (Table 6).

### 4. PEOPLES' PARTICIPATION

The term 'people's participation' has several connotations. It refers to the idea that people have the right to decide their own needs, and can be interpreted in





two ways. Firstly, it means people's involvement and engagement in the development projects during all its phases including planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Secondly, it means group action in the form of Self Help Groups (SHG), Social Action Groups (SAG), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), etc. People's participation through *Gram Sabha* comes under the first definition. Nowadays community participation is more commonly used instead of people's participation.

The concept of people's participation is as old as our civilization. It developed within the society earlier in the villages and later in towns and cities. In Indian villages, the legacy of people's participation is very old and most of the work which benefits the whole village was done through people's participation without any discrimination of caste and class. People actively participated in managing common property resources. This is called '*Kar Sewa*' (community action). In the contemporary period, the concept of people's participation was first used in 1950s, when Community Development Programme (CDP) was launched in the First Five-year Plan (1951-1956). At that time it carried limited meaning as it referred to persuading people to adopt innovative agricultural inputs and practices. Its meaning has since been enlarged. In 1960s, with the introduction of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, it took on a different connotation, denoting people's participation in decision making processes. During 1990s after the implementation of Constitution's 73rd Amendment Act, its meaning changed further. Now it not only means peoples' participation in decision making but also in its implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

#### 4.1 Types of Peoples' Participation

- **Passive:** People are informed about what is happening. Thus they are not successful. Rural development programs in India are of this type;
- **Informative:** People are requested to answer questions by experts but are not included in planning and decision making;
- **Material or Incentive:** People provide resources, like labor in return for cash or kind e.g. Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme;
- **Consultative:** People are consulted, but experts define problems and find solutions;
- **Functional:** People form local groups to meet their needs but are dependent on outsiders for finance;
- **Interactive:** People participate in need assessment, planning, decision making, and maintaining structures and practices; and
- **Self-mobilized:** People take initiatives independent of outsiders, and are in control over the cycle of development process. This is urgently needed in India for a faster and sustainable rural development. To enable this, constitution of



India has provided for a *Gram Sabha* as a forum for participation of rural people in their development.

#### 4.2 People's Participation through *Gram Sabha*

Only an active involvement of people and community through participation can bring about a sustainable rural transformation. Active peoples' participation is the prerequisite condition for successful implementation of rural development programs. The idea of peoples' active participation in rural development was realized through mandatory provision of *Gram Sabha* in the Constitution's 73rd Amendment Act. The *Gram Sabha* is an institution giving collective strength to the poor and deprived, who in turn gain self confidence to stand on their own and regain the spirit of self reliance and human dignity.

*Gram Sabha* means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to a village comprised within the area of *Panchayat* at the village level. In Bihar, every revenue village has been considered as a *Gram Sabha*. Since a revenue village in Bihar has an average population more than 3,000, it is very difficult to assemble them all at single place and time. There must be provision of Ward Sabha, and villages of Bihar have been divided into several wards with their respective ward members.

A *Gram Sabha* may exercise such powers and perform such functions at the village level as the legislature of a state may by law provide. Thus the ball is in the state legislature's court, which for all practical purpose means the state government. The members of *Gram Sabha* have nothing to do except constituting the Sabha. The state government dominates, and *Gram Sabhas* faces a perpetual situation of dependency and uncertainty. The Government of Bihar has delegated following powers and functions to *Gram Sabha*:

##### Powers of *Gram Sabha*

- To prepare the annual plan of the *Gram Panchayat*;
- To pass annual budget of the *Panchayat*;
- To prepare development reports of the last and next year of the *panchayat*; and
- To constitute vigilance committees.

##### Functions of *Gram Sabha*

- To help in the implementation of rural development programs in the village.
- To identify beneficiaries of different rural development programs.
- To provide funds for or help in the social welfare programs of the village.

- To help in the education and family welfare programs in the village.
- To demand income and expenditure report under various rural development schemes from *Gram Panchayat*.

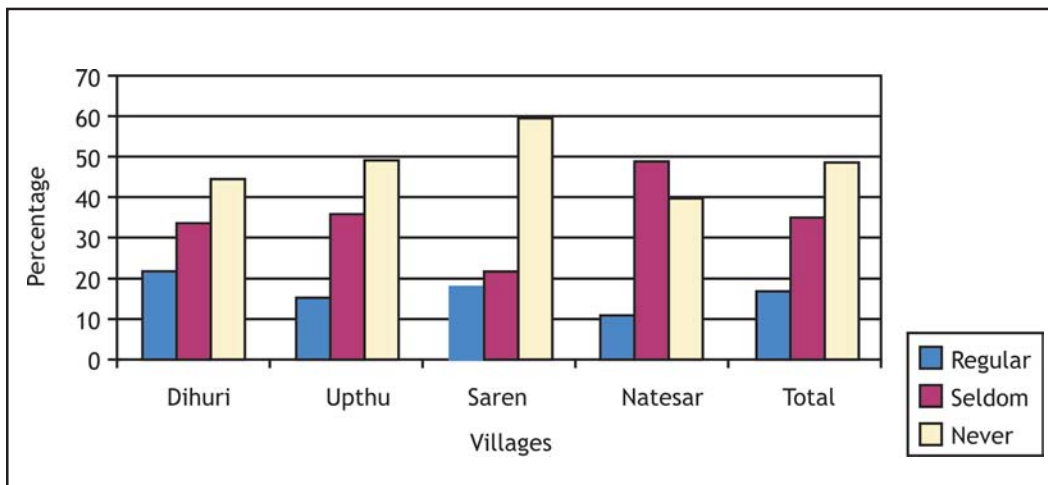
### 5. FUNCTIONING OF GRAM SABHA IN THE SELECTED VILLAGES

As the *Gram Sabha* prepares plans and budgets, and audits reports, one may argue that it has effective control over the *Gram Panchayat*, but not necessarily in reality. The legal position is different. The *Gram Sabha* makes recommendations and suggestions, and the *Gram Panchayat* gives due consideration to its recommendations and suggestions. There is no legal obligation on the *Gram Panchayat* to accept the recommendations and suggestions of *Gram Panchayat*. This has created the problem of *Mukhia Raj* instead of *Gram Swaraj*. This has made the *Gram Sabha* meaningless.

In the surveyed villages a number of people had not even heard the name of *Gram Sabha*, so participation is a distant goal. They usually called it *Aam Sabha* (General Assembly), which is held once in five years to elect new members of the *panchayats*. Besides, instead of one *Gram (Aam) Sabha* and elected *Panchayat* per revenue village, it is organized over an average of four revenue villages. Many of the elected *panchayat* members are not aware of *Gram Sabha*, and its powers and functions. *Panchayat* members and Block officials allege that *Gram Sabhas* are held regularly in these villages but villagers do not participate.

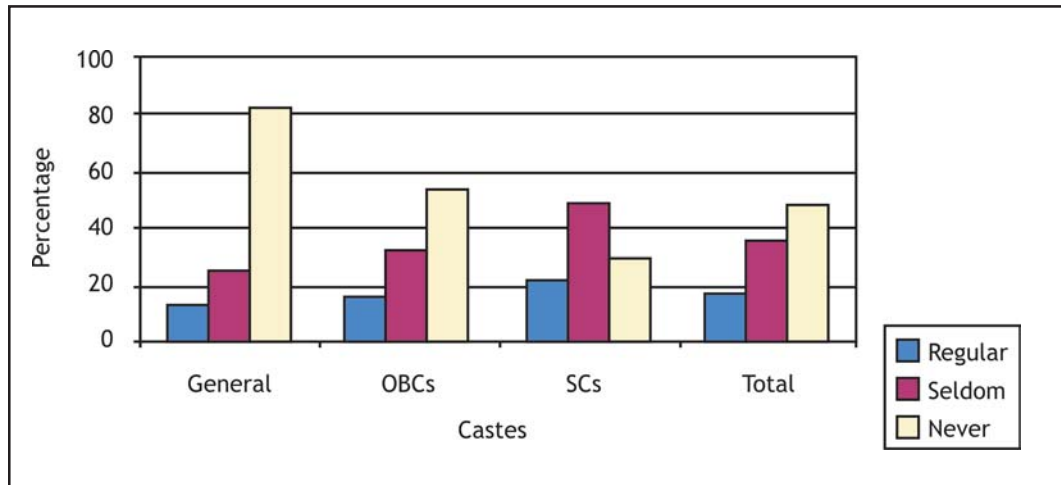
Villagers claim non-participation because their plans and demands are not considered, and every thing is decided by the *Mukhia*, officials and dominant personality of major castes and communities. Thus they consider it wastage of time. Of the 180 respondents, 17 percent regularly participated in the *Gram Sabha* meetings, 35 percent seldom participated and a whopping 48 percent never

Fig. 3 People’s Participation in Gram Sabha Meetings by Village





**Fig. 4 People’s Participation in Gram Sabha Meetings by Caste**



**Table 7 Attendance in Gram Sabha Meetings by Village**

Villages	Both Men and Women	Only Men	Head of the Family	Nobody
Dihuri	4.5%	33.4%	11.0%	51.0%
Upthu	4.5%	17.8%	17.7%	60.0%
Saren	6.7%	53.3%	15.5%	24.4%
Natesar	2.2%	20.0%	22.2%	55.6%
Total	4.5%	31.0%	16.7%	47.8%

Source: Primary Field Survey, 2006

**Table 8 Attendance in Gram Sabha Meetings by Caste**

Caste	Both Men and Women	Only Men	Head of the Family	Nobody
General	0.0%	23.3%	13.3%	63.4%
OBCs	3.3%	28.3%	20.0%	48.3%
SCs	10.0%	41.7%	16.7%	31.6%
Total	4.5%	31.0%	16.7%	47.8%

Source: Primary Field Survey, 2006

participated in the *Gram Sabha* meetings. Further there were large deviations across the four villages (Fig. 3) and three caste groups (Fig. 4).

Out of the 180 sampled households in the four surveyed villages, both men and women equally participated in the *Gram Sabha* meetings in only 4.5 percent of the households. In 31 percent households only men participated, while in 16.7 percent the head of the family attended the meetings. In a majority of the households i.e. 47.8 percent, nobody joined the *Gram Sabha* meetings. There were large variations across the four villages (Table 7) and three caste groups (Table 8).

It is clear from the above data and analysis that a majority of 48 percent households did not attend the meetings. Despite a statutory provision of one third representation to

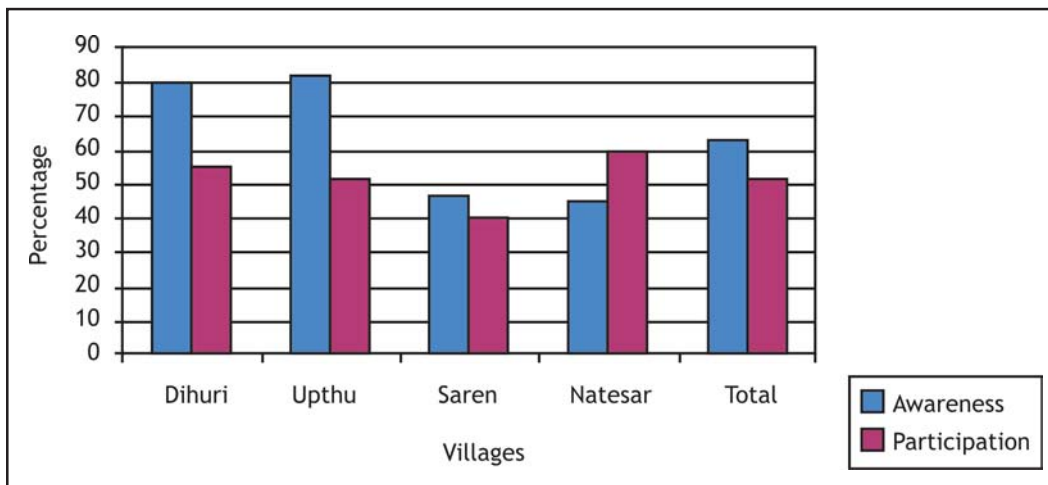
women, and their mandatory quorum in *Gram Sabha* meetings, clear cut apathy among the households and violation of legal provisions is visible. Social restrictions and traditions (including *Purdah* system among the Muslims) generally prohibits free participation of women in public activities. Low representation of women may also be due to their lower status in the family. They usually do household and domestic works of rearing children, cleaning homes, cooking meals. Outdoor works

including participation in *Gram Sabha* is seen as the role of male members of the family. Representation of women is better among SC families as both male and female equally work and earn for the family, and they do not follow social restrictions like *purdah* system. Thus SC women freely participate in the public activities, though no one pays attention to their demands and needs in these meetings.

While attending a meeting of *Gram Sabha* in one of the surveyed villages, it was observed that women participants were silent spectators. Even women members of *panchayat* were neglected. It was learnt that the power given to women members is exercised by their male relatives - father, brother, husband or son. Further, the block officials do not entertain them. So they hesitate to visit block headquarters and interact with the officials. Thus, woman empowerment remains a constitutional provision with ground reality being very much different. All attempts to interview a female *panchayat* member were either resented or answered by their male relatives. In some cases, the male relative even declined to reveal the name of the women member, who is legally the ward member in the *panchayat*. This reveals the story of male dominance in the villages of Bihar, and perhaps much of India.

Higher participation of scheduled castes in the *panchayat* activities is partly due to the fact that most of the rural development programs have special provisions for them. Here too they remain mere spectator. It was observed in most cases that the Mukhia or a member of the dominant caste (powerful) decides who will get what. No one pays attention to economically and socially marginalized members, and women. The dominant class and caste in the rural society controls the poor and deprived sections. Though the constitution attempted to change the situation, and minimize the political and social divide in the villages, there is no sign of change in the mindset of the dominant classes and castes in the rural society. The new arrangements are still in the process of getting stabilized.

**Fig. 5 Level of Awareness of Rural Development Programs and Level of People's Participation in Panchayat Meetings by Village**

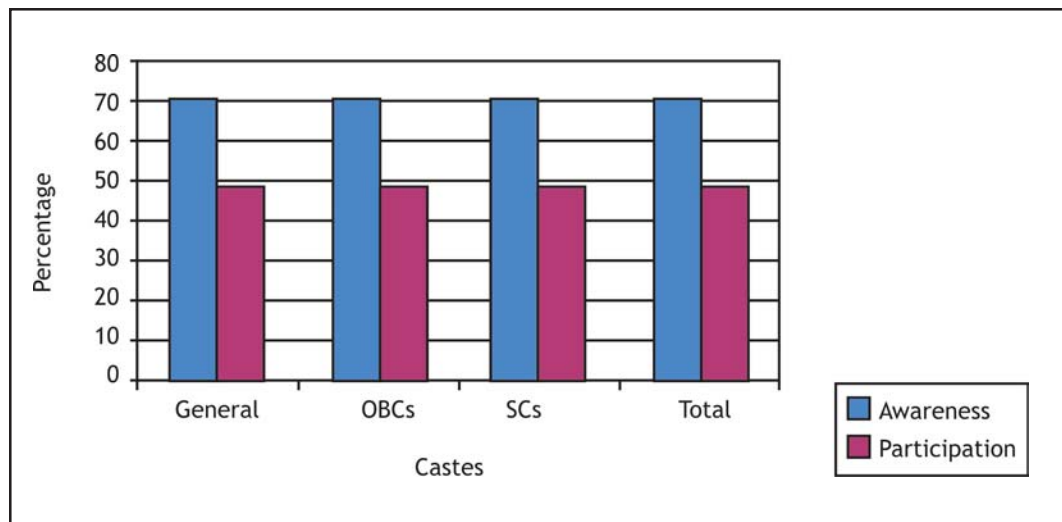




### 5.1 Level of Awareness and People’s Participation

Effective rural development and rural reconstruction requires active participation of people in large number at local level. The factor determining rural people’s participation is the level of awareness of different programs and their perceived benefits in their lives, which in turn is determined by the level of education especially functional education of the people. This fact is very much noticeable in the four surveyed villages. In these villages, 63 percent of the respondents were aware of one or more rural development schemes, while their participation in the *panchayat* meetings is 52 percent whether regular or seldom (Fig. 5). The level of awareness of different programs was highest among SC at 72 percent. Their participation in *panchayat* meetings was also the highest at 70 percent. On the other hand, level of awareness was lowest at 53 percent among respondents of general castes. Simultaneously, their participation in *panchayat* meetings was also the lowest at 38 percent respondents (Fig. 6).

**Fig. 6 Level of Awareness of Rural Development Programs and Level of People’s Participation in Panchayat Meetings by Caste**



**Table 9 Level of Awareness and People’s Participation**

Villages	Level of Awareness		People’s Participation	
	Literates	Illiterates	Literates	Illiterates
Dihuri	88.0%	70.0%	72.6%	40.0%
Upthu	91.7%	76.0%	50.0%	38.1%
Saren	78.9%	23.0%	63.1%	60.4%
Natesar	60.9%	31.8%	52.1%	40.2%
Total	80.2%	48.3%	59.3%	44.6%

Source: Primary Field Survey, 2006

Among the respondents, 80 percent of the literate and 48 percent of the illiterate were aware of one or other programs while 59 percent of literate and 45 percent of illiterate participated in the *panchayat* meetings (Table 9).

The above analysis clearly indicates a relationship between the level of awareness of different rural development programs and level of



peoples' participation in *panchayat* meetings and activities. There is also a strong correlation between educational level, and levels of awareness and peoples' participation. Hence, in order to stimulate greater participation of rural people in rural development and reconstruction activities, the rural people should not only be educated but also made aware of the different programs.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Self mobilized participation of people in rural development is a critical factor, which is possible through a vibrant and powerful *Gram Sabha*. Unfortunately participation of rural people in *Gram Sabha* is very low in the villages of Bihar. This is attributed to strong caste segregation; class difference and gender divide in the villages of Bihar. Two prominent groups of people lead the *panchayats*; the first group includes traditional influential persons, and the second group consists of new and raw entrants. Significance of participation in the *panchayat* activities and implementation of rural development programs has not yet been realized by the common man. Women representatives are much neglected. Thus there is a need to empower them by providing them proper training and education. Peoples' participation in rural development remains little due to poor literacy rate and little awareness of the rural development programs. Thus there is a need to educate and create awareness among the members of *Gram Sabha* about their powers and functions.

## REFERENCES

- Development Association for Self-reliance, Communication and Health (2009) *Approach Setting for Community Management*, DASCOH, Dhaka.
- Government of India (1993) *The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992*, Government of India New Delhi.
- Government of Bihar (1993) *Bihar Panchayati Raj Act, 1993*, Patna.
- Government of Bihar (2006) *Bihar Panchayati Raj Act, 2006*, Patna.