

Do the MGNREGA Beneficiaries Participate in Gram Shaba? A Case Study of Morigoan District of Assam

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Abstract — Several social expenditure schemes were under taken by the government since independent in almost all the prospects of human development like education, health, employment generation etc. But none of the scheme has yielded any satisfactory result so far. Several studies have reveals that the major reason behind its failure is the top down approach adopted in the implementation of the schemes. Taking into considerations the loopholes of the earlier development scheme, the UPA government launched another rural development programme namely MGNREGA with the bottom up approach of development with due importance to people's participation. The term people participation gain momentum after the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD) in 1979 concluded with a note of concern that the failures of most of the development programmes in developing countries are mainly due to the lack of active participation of the people for whom these programmes are designed. By now almost all the nations have increasing realization of the importance of people participation in the development programmes. This paper attempts to list out the people participation friendly provisions adopted in this programme and also the awareness level of the participants regarding this provisions and their participation in the gram sabha in the study area of Morigoan district of Assam.

Keywords — Participation; Gram Sabha; MGNREGA

1. Introduction

Since independence, the Ministry of Rural Development is striving to bring about rapid and sustainable development and socio-economic transformation in rural India and also to ensure equity and effective people's participation. Initially the emphasis was laid on planned economy in which the state planned everything for the benefit of people at the lower levels. Such an approach failed to involve people and tap their potential in the process of development. Considering the rising disparity among regions, unequal distribution of income within a region and persistent problem of poverty, planners at the higher level felt the need for decentralized planning in development. Though, since 1960s, the bottom-up approach gained wide recognition among policy makers, academicians, administrators and research scholars. It was as late as in 1992; this approach got the constitutional recognition with the enactment of 73rd Constitution Amendment Act. This Amendment Act empowers the Gram Sabha for the planning at the Gram Panchayat, a new paradigm of planning has begun. With this amendment the Gram Panchayats would make plans as per their local resources, and undertake necessary programmes of direct importance to the community and also to the individuals and the plan so prepared would be sustainable for the socio-economic development of the people. The *Gram Sabha* being potentially the most significant institution for participatory approach and decentralization, it has been decided to observe 1999-2000 as the "Year of *Gram Sabha*" (Pal 2009). With the increasing realization of the importance of people participation in the process of their

development, the MGNREGA programme of rural development was launched by UPA government in 2005 has given due importance to bottom up approach of development where the gram sabha is the important platform for the people to participate in the implementation to the evaluation process of the programme. It have been highly realized that the success of the development programmes largely depends on the proper adoption of participatory approach in the grass root level.

2. Participatory Approach in the Process of Development

Active participation of the people in the programme meant for their development is imperative for the better implementation of the programme. In almost all the developing countries people's participation occupies a central place in their development thinking and participation of people is widely recognized as an important variable for rural development. The involvement of the people in their development through grassroots democratic institutions like *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) was contemplated in the First Five Year Plan in the early fifties after independence. Instead of establishing Panchayats, Community Development (CD) and National Extension Service Pogrammes were launched in 1952. These were ineffective in drawing participation in developmental activities due to the absence of effective instruments for participation at district and sub-district levels. These programmes, popularly known as community development programmes, regarded rural people as beneficiaries but not participants in the development process. They were centrally designed and were

implemented by extension agents using a top-down mode of decision-making which had no knowledge of local conditions and the requirement of training. Consequently, due to the factors like legal barriers, lack of access to resources, gender imbalance and traditional power structures much of the benefits of the programmes were absorbed by the better off sections of the rural communities.

It was during the Second Five Year Plan, which stated that democratic institutions within the district should be created where the entire community, particularly the weaker sections, might get involved in developmental activities. For this purpose, the Balvantrai Mehta Team (BMT) (1957) was appointed to study and present a report on the CD Projects and National Extension Services. The BMT broadly suggested two directions for inducing participation in local decisions-making. First, administrative decentralization, and, second, bringing it under the control of elected bodies for effective implementation of developmental programmes.

In 1970s and 1980s some development strategies, such as Integrated Rural Development Programmes (IRDPs), promoted the people's participation in the mobilization and use of local resources. This approach of participation regarded the underutilized "free labour" of the people as an important input for sharing the process and cost of development activities, the "ownership" of the projects by the people were also ensured under these programmes. The concept People's participation was formulated in the mid of 1970, when there was a growing awareness that the development efforts undertaken in different countries were having little impact on poverty. The world Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD) in 1979 concluded with a note of concern that the failures of most of the development programmes in developing countries are mainly due to the lack of active participation of the people for whom these programmes are designed. It has been now increasingly realized that unless the rural poor are given the means to participate fully in development, they will continue to be excluded from its benefits.

Several studies are undertaken by scholars who emphases on the decentralization of power as the right approach to ensure people's participation in the process of their development. Azfar *et al* (2000) reveals that the corruption at the local level is comparatively less than at the central level because of wider people's participation at the local level. Bradan (2002) supported the observation of Azfar *et al* (2000). Methew and Methew (2003) discuss participation in the gram sabha and noted that the woman participation is significantly low. He argued that it is mainly because of lack of awareness of meeting, political minorities feeling and the backward caste feeling that their voice are not heard in the meeting. The study of Han *et al*

(2010) stated four benefits of people's participation through decentralization process, they are (1) enhance transparency, (2) increased accountability, (3) reduced absenteeism and (4) improved services at no extra cost and at the same time improved quality of government outputs because local preference are considered Asaduzzaman (2008), Khan (2009) and Aref (2011) analyzed the rural development programme focusing on people's participation, and opined that the main reason behind the failure of the rural development programme was the lack of awareness and participation of the indigenous people in the gram sabha and in the decision making process.

Keeping in mind the importance of the participatory development approach in rural development, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) programme in India has made an effort to improve the people's participation level in decision making process to the evaluation process through the provision of Right to Information Act, social audit and the gram sabha which are indeed unique platforms for the villagers to raise their voice and monitor the working of the programme. For the purpose, the bottom-up participatory approach of development has been adopted where; the gram panchayat is the nodal agency at bottom level that has the authority to select, design and implement 50 percent of the works. MGNREGA is considered to be superior to earlier rural development programme on the ground of its due importance given to the participation of the beneficiaries in decision making process.

The study aim at examining the level of participation of the participant in the decision making process through the gram sabha and also to find out the factors affecting the participation in gram sabha in the study area of Morigaon district of Assam.

3. Data and Methodology

The study was carried out in the Kapili development block of Morigaon district of Assam. Kapili development block comprises of eight gram panchayats, out of these eight gram panchayats five comes under Morigaon district and three come under Nagoan district. As the gram panchayats are the main implementing agencies under MGNREGA, all the five gram panchayats that come under Kapili development block of Morigaon district are selected for the study and two villages are selected from each of the gram panchayats, one village nearer to the panchayat office and the other far from the panchayat office (table 1). 30 participants of MGNREGA were randomly selected from each of the selected village. A total of 300 participant of MGNREGA sample were interviewed. A structured questionnaire is used to interact with the selected sample and mainly tabular method is used for the interpretation of the data collected in the study area.

Table 1. Distribution of selected Villages as per the Distance from the Panchyat Office in the Study Area

Name of the panchyat	Selected villages	Distance from panchyat office
Charibahi	Charibahi	0 kilo meter
	Bumuraguri	3.5 kilo meter
Kalmoubari	Kalmoubari	0 kilometer
	Barchukabha	5 kilo meter
Jaluguti	Jaluguti	0 kilo meter
	Bonpara	2.5 kilo meter
Mikirgoan	Mikirgoan	0 kilo meter
	Tukunabori	5.5 kilo meter
Borbhogai	Borbhogai	0 kilo meter
	Niz mikirgoan	6 kilo meter

Source: Respective Panchyat Office

3.1 Distribution of the Respondents According to their Caste, Gender and Religion in the Study Area

The village of Bonpara is with the highest number of SC/ST respondents followed by the village Bumuraguri and Niz mikirgoan, with 100 per cent, 80 per cent and 70 per cent respectively. With regards to female participation village Charibahi is the highest with 33.3 per cent of female followed by Bonpara with 30.0 percent and Niz mikirgoan with 26.7 percent. It can be stated from table 2 that the village Barchukabha, Kalmoubari and Tukunabori are the Muslim dominated village with 80 per cent, 73.3 per cent and 66.6 percent of Muslim respondent respectively. It is also observed that the female participation from the Muslim dominated villages is comparatively less than the Hindu dominated villages. As among the Muslim communities only the widow with no other source of income are allowed to work in MGNREGA.

Table 2. Distribution of the Respondents According to their Caste, Gender and Religion in the surveyed villages

Village	SC/ST	Female	Male	Hindu	Muslim	Total
Charibahi	7(23.3)	10 (33.3)	20 (66.7)	30 (100)	0 (00)	30
Bumuraguri	24 (80.0)	2 (6.7)	28 (93.3)	30 (100)	0 (00)	30
Kalmoubari	8 (26.7)	5 (16.7)	25 (83.3)	8 (26.6)	22 (73.3)	30
Barchukabha	0(00)	1 (3.3)	29 (96.7)	6 (20.0)	24 (80.0)	30
Jaluguti	17 (56.7)	7 (23.3)	23 (76.7)	16 (53.3)	14 (46.6)	30
Bonpara	30 (100)	9 (30.0)	21 (70.0)	30 (100)	0 (00)	30
Mikirgoan	17 (56.7)	5 (16.7)	25 (83.3)	17 (56.6)	13 (43.3)	30
Tukunabori	10 (33.3)	2 (6.7)	28 (93.3)	10 (33.3)	20 (66.6)	30
Borbhagia	17 (56.7)	5 (16.7)	25 (83.3)	30 (100)	0 (00)	30
Niz mikirgoan	21(70.0)	8 (26.7)	22 (73.3)	30 (100)	0 (00)	30
Total	150 (50.0)	54 (18.0)	246 (82.0)	207 (69.0)	93 (31.0)	300

Source: Field survey conducted in August-October, 2011.

Note: Figures in the parentheses represent percentage to total.

3.2 Gender wise Distribution of the Respondents as Illiterate and Literate in the Study Area

The table 3 reveals that among the surveyed villages the village Charibahi is with cent per cent literate respondents followed by the village Borbhogai with 90.0 per cent literate.

Bumuraguri is with the highest illiterate number of respondents (50.0 per cent) followed by Kalmoubari with 36.7 percent illiterate. With regards to female literacy, Charibahi is with cent per cent literate female respondent, after Charibahi it is Niz mikirgoan where 75.0 per cent of female are literate. Female literacy rate is comparatively less than the male literacy rate in the study area.

Table 3. Distribution Participants as per the Reasons for not Attending the Gram Sabha Regularly

Village	Not Informed	Member quarrels	Distance	Lit. Panchayat Members dominate Proceedings	Women and thus not allowed	Non-availability of Time	Dist. of the office is high & dominance of some Class	Dist. is long & dominance of some Class & scarcity of time	Dominance of some Class & scarcity of time	Long Dist. & scarcity of time	Total
Charaibahi	0 (00)	4 (16.6)	0 (00)	8 (33.3)	4 (16.6)	4 (16.6)	0 (00)	0 (00)	4 (16.6)	0 (00)	24
Bumuraguri	4 (13.3)	5 (16.6)	3 (10.0)	3 (10.0)	2 (6.6)	5 (16.6)	4 (13.3)	2 (6.6)	2 (6.6)	0 (00)	30
Kalmoubari	0 (00)	2 (7.4)	0 (00)	10 (37.0)	5 (18.5)	3 (11.1)	0 (00)	0 (00)	7 (25.9)	0 (00)	27
Borchakabaha	3 (10.0)	4 (13.3)	2 (6.6)	7 (28.0)	1 (3.3)	4 (13.3)	0 (00)	4 (13.3)	2 (6.6)	3 (10.0)	30
Jaluguti	0 (00)	5 (17.8)	0 (00)	9 (32.1)	7 (25.0)	3 (10.7)	0 (00)	0 (00)	4 (14.2)	0 (00)	28
Bonpara	5 (16.6)	3 (10.0)	2 (6.6)	2 (6.6)	5 (16.6)	8 (26.6)	0 (00)	0 (00)	2 (6.6)	3 (10.0)	30
Mikirgaon	0 (00)	3 (12.0)	0 (00)	9 (36.0)	4 (16.0)	4 (16.0)	0 (00)	0 (00)	5 (20.0)	0 (00)	25
Tukunabori	4 (13.3)	4 (13.3)	6 (20.0)	6 (20.0)	2 (6.6)	3 (10.0)	0 (00)	0 (00)	5 (16.6)	0 (00)	30
Borghogai	0 (00)	3 (12.0)	0 (00)	8 (32.0)	3 (12.0)	6 (24.0)	0 (00)	0 (00)	5 (25.0)	0 (00)	25
Nizmikirgoam	5 (17.8)	2(7.1)	3 (10.7)	3 (10.7)	5 (17.8)	3 (10.7)	5 (17.8)	0 (00)	2 (7.1)	0 (00)	28
Total	21 (7.5)	35 (12.6)	16 (5.7)	65(23.4)	38(13.7)	43(15.5)	9 (3.2)	6 (2.1)	38 (13.7)	6 (2.1)	277

Source: Field survey conducted in August-October, 2011.

Note: Figures in the parentheses represent percentage to total.

Table 4. Gender wise Distribution of the Respondents as Illiterate and Literate in the Study Area

Village			Illiterate		Literate		Total		
	Illiterate	Literate	M	F	M	F	M	F	T
Charibahi	0(00)	30 (100)	0 (00)	0 (00)	20 (100)	10 (100)	20	10	30
Bumuraguri	15(50.0)	15 (50.0)	13(46.4)	2(100.0)	15(53.0)	0 (00)	28	2	30
Kalmoubari	11 (36.7)	19 (63.3)	8 (32.0)	3(60.0)	17(28.0)	2(40.0)	25	5	30
Barchukabha	6 (20.0)	24 (80.0)	6(20.6)	0(00)	23(85.1)	1(100)	29	1	30
Jaluguti	8 (26.7)	22 (73.3)	5(21.7)	3(42.9)	18(78.2)	4(57.2)	23	7	30
Bonpara	9 (30.0)	21 (70.0)	6(28.5)	3(33.3)	15(71.4)	6(66.6)	21	9	30
Mikirgoan	6 (20.0)	24 (80.0)	6(24.0)	0 (00)	19(76.0)	5 (100)	25	5	30
Tukunabori	7 (23.3)	23 (76.6)	7(25.0)	0(00)	21(75.0)	2 (100)	28	2	30
Borbhogai	3 (10.0)	27 (90.0)	1(4.0)	2(40.0)	24(96.0)	3 (60.0)	25	5	30
Niz mikirgoan	5 (16.7)	25 (83.3)	3(13.6)	2(25.0)	19(86.3)	6 (75.0)	22	8	30
Total	70 (23.3)	230 (76.6)	55 (22.5)	15(27.8)	191(77.6)	39(72.2)	246	54	300

Source: Field survey conducted in August-October, 2011.

Note: Figures in the parentheses represent percentage to total.

4. Level of Awareness of Participants about Various Provisions of MGNREGA

MGNREGA is considered to be superior to any other rural development programme implemented in India on the ground of some provisions like unemployment allowance, worksite facilities, payment through bank accounts of

workers and social audit etc. But these provisions will benefit the participants only when they are aware of those provisions.

It has been observed that there was a wide variation across the villages in regard to the level of awareness regarding those provisions. The participants in all the villages were more aware of the running wage rate (about

56 per cent) and about the job card that should remain with them and not with the panchayat members (64.0 per cent). But in regard to other provisions, the level of awareness was comparatively low. Regarding the worksite facilities, the awareness level was only 12.3 per cent, and for unemployment allowance 26.3 per cent and none of the participants across the surveyed villages was aware of the travel allowance and ombudsman. On an average, the awareness level (diagram-1) was the highest among the participants of the village Borbhagia (51.1 per cent) followed by Charaiabahi (46.67 per cent) and these two villages were with the lowest illiteracy and comparatively

high female participation. Awareness level was the lowest among the participants of Bumuraguri village which happens to have the highest illiteracy among the participants and low level of female participation. Hence, educational status (especially of the women) has a positive impact on the level of awareness of the villagers. It has been further observed that the distance of the village from their panchayat office adversely affected the information received and thus awareness level of the participants. The villages situated nearer to the panchayat office were with higher level of awareness as compared to that of the villages situated far from the panchayat office.

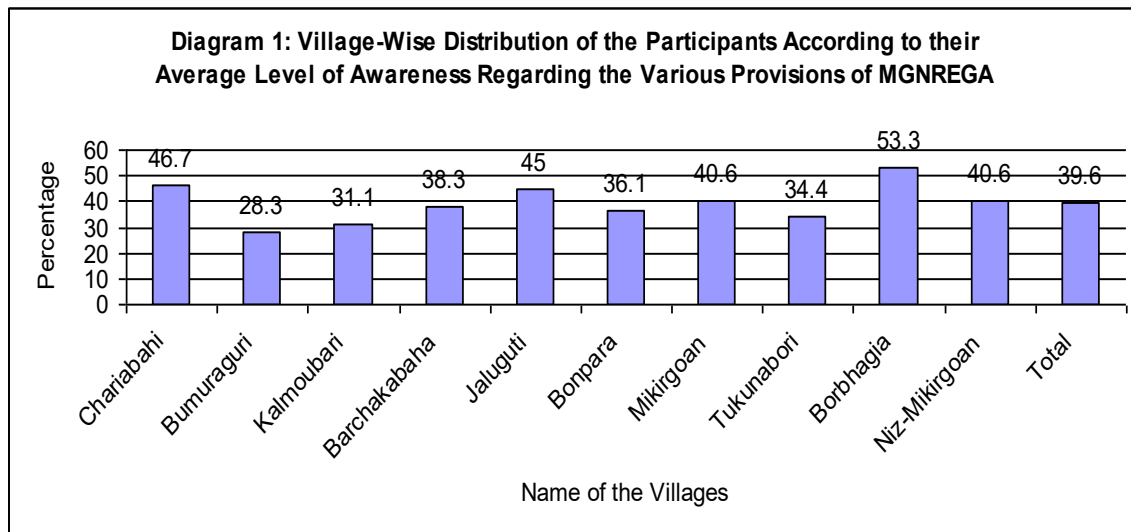


Fig.1: Village-wise distribution of the participants according to their average level of awareness regarding various provisions of MGNREGA

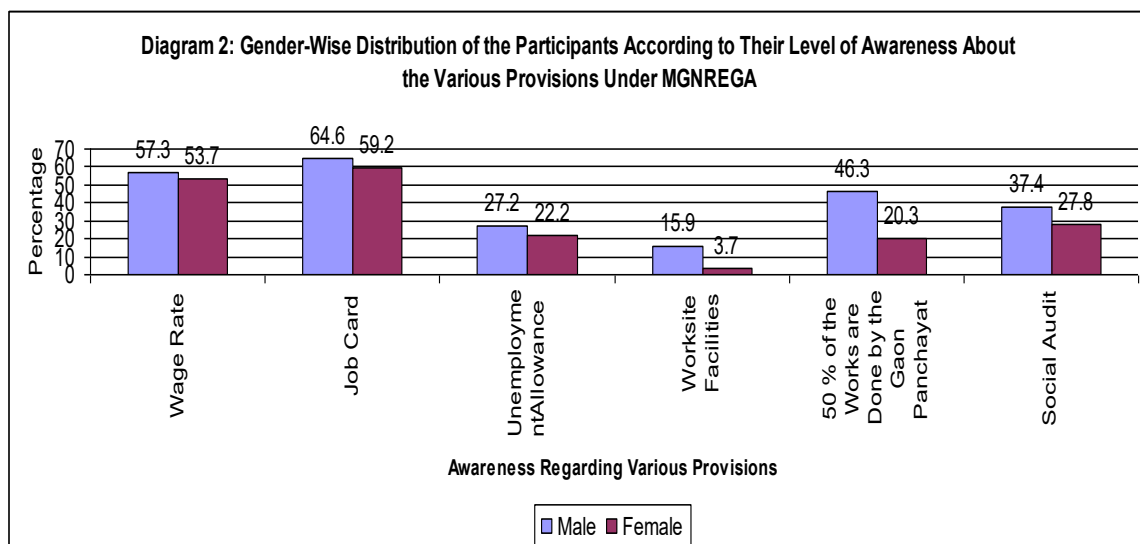


Fig.2: Gender-wise distribution of the participants according to their level of awareness about various provisions under MGNREGA

4.1 Gender-Wise Distribution of Participants According to their Level of Awareness about the Various Provision of MGNREGA

In regard to the gender-wise distribution of the level of awareness it can be stated that awareness level of the female has been significantly low than the male in respect of all the provisions of MGNREGA, except in case of wage rate and job card. Figure2 reveals that the awareness level of females has been comparatively high in case of the basic provisions like wage rate and job card with 53.7 per cent and 59.2 per cent respectively. But their awareness in regard to the other facilities entitled to them under the MNGREGA programme was very low. Among all the provisions the awareness of both male and female about the worksite facilities like drinking water, first aid, crèche facilities for woman with children etc were very low with figures registered at 17.0 and 5.5 per cent respectively, and the female awareness was observed to be significantly low. A village-wise analysis reveals that in the village of Charaibahi, Borbhogia and Niz-Mikirgaon the awareness of females was comparatively higher than the females from other villages. One reason for this might be that these two villages had highest female literacy rate.

4.2 Distribution of Participants as per the Attendance in Gram Sabha

The Gram Sabha is the platform where all matters of concern are discussed between the panchayat members and

the villagers. It is the institution that provides a space to the villagers and opportunity to voice their opinions. In MGNREGA also the Gram Sabha holds an important place. The success of this participatory approach of development depends on the active participation of the beneficiaries in the Gram Sabha. It is the place where all the MGNREGA workers and the panchayat members directly interact and discuss the issues relating to MGNREGA. Keeping in mind the importance of Gram Sabha, this section made an attempt to evaluate the level of participation of the respondents in the Gram Sabha. Out of the total sample about 49.4% stated that they do not attend the gram sabha meet. The information collected reveals that in almost all the villages, percentage of male attending the Gram Sabha meet was higher than that of female participation (Figure3).

However, females from the SC/ST communities and Hindu religion dominated villages and females especially in the villages with higher literacy rate participate more in the Gram Sabha meet. But female from the Muslim dominated villages namely Kalmoubari, Borchakabaha and Tukunabori did not participate in the meeting. It also reveals that the villages nearer the panchayat office were participating with higher degree in the Gram Sabha than the villages located far from the panchayat office. Hence, it can be safely argued that apart from caste, community and education, distance from the panchayat office has been an important factor affecting the level of participation of respondents in the Gram Sabha meeting.

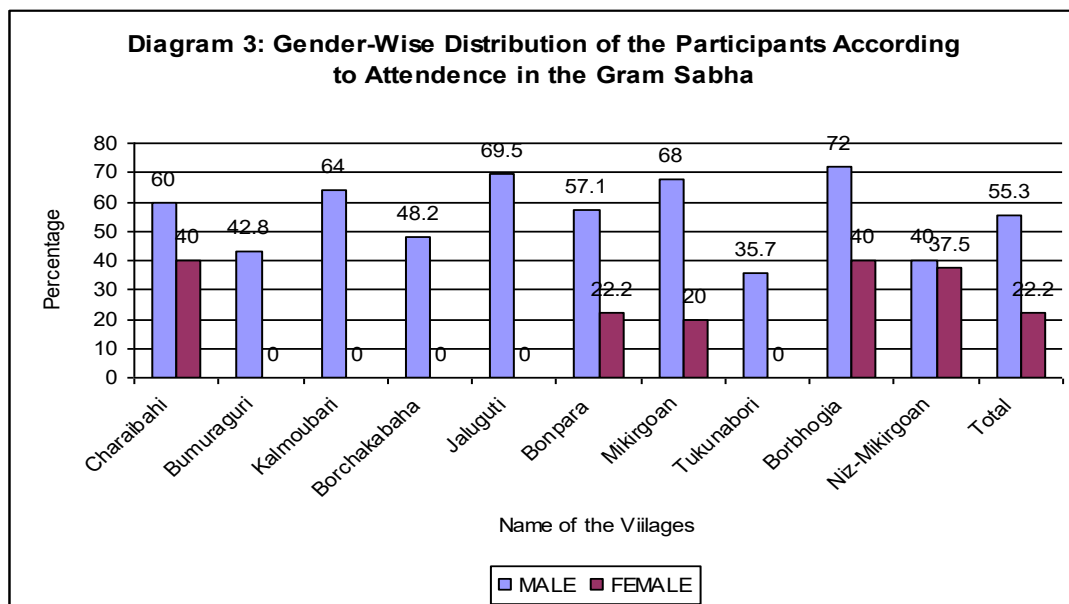


Fig.3: Gender-wise distribution of the participants according to attendance in the Gram Sabha

4.3 Distribution of Participants as per the Reasons for not Attending the Gram Sabha

Several reasons were cited by the respondents for not attending the Gram Sabha meeting regularly, (table-3). Nearly 8 per cent of the participants of MGNREGA in the study area stated that they were not informed in advance about the meeting. It was observed that among surveyed villages, the respondents from the villages far away from the panchayat office were not informed of the scheduled Gram Sabha meeting. Here distance might be the cause of being missed out. Almost 12.6 per cent of the respondents stated that they were not interested to attend the meeting, as very often the meeting turned into a fighting ground. Most of the time, people attending the meeting were found to have different views and none of them wanted to solve their disputes in a mutually understanding manner. Some respondents (about 6 per cent), mainly from the villages situated far from the panchayat office, stated that the Gram Sabha was held in places far from their area, and hence not convenient for them to cover that distance just to attend such meeting. The other major reasons were the dominance of certain class of people especially, the literates and the panchayat members in the Gram Sabha many a times discouraged some of the willing respondents (23 per cent) to attend the meeting, as they always felt to be ignored in the meeting. Thus their suggestions and complaints were never taken into consideration. Gender discrimination was also one of the reasons for not attending the Gram Sabha. Participation of women in the decision making through the Gram Sabha was very negligible. Nearly 15 per cent of the respondents stated that they had no time to attend the meeting. The daily labourer generally did not want to take a leave from their daily service just to attend the Gram Sabha.

5. Conclusion

Gram Sabha has been the medium through which the stakeholders of MGNREGA can participate in the decision making process of the programme. But the survey shows that in the study area number of participants attending the Gram Sabha meeting regularly was very scanty and majority of those who attended the meeting hesitated to put forward their views. Instead, they participated as silent spectators and simply followed the decision taken by a few influential persons mainly the panchayat members. There are many socio-cultural factors that impede the progress of decentralization in rural areas and thus have an impact on participatory development. Social disparities at the grassroots level - in terms of caste, class, religion, gender and political status - have major impact on culture and had a strong bearing on the ability of people to participate in the village development process. It is argued that it is fundamental for development project to take such matter

into consideration through massive awareness programme and proper training for the participants of MGNREGA.

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