

Women Finding Their Voice in the Gram Sabha

The resolve women made at the gatherings—**“We will go to the Gram Sabha...”**—was visibly translated into action at the Gram Sabhas held on 15 August. This time, in villages across Nashik district, including Peth, Surgana and Trimbakeshwar talukas, women’s presence at the flag-hoisting ceremonies and Gram Sabhas, as well as their participation in the discussions, was noticeably higher.



This change began a few months earlier. Pragati Abhiyan started a series of women’s meetings and gatherings in villages. These became spaces to discuss the Gram Sabha, Mahila Sabha, Gram Panchayat funds and priorities for development works. Women began to understand what issues mattered most to them and how to raise these issues in the Gram Sabha. They started attending Gram Sabhas with their concerns and demands.

“Hold a Mahila Sabha Before the Gram Sabha!”

The first signs of this change were visible as early as the Gram Sabha held on 26 January. In Shingdari village of Peth taluka, the January Gram Sabha had almost taken the form of a Mahila Sabha! Women outnumbered men among those present. This time, women also demanded that a Mahila Sabha be held before the Gram Sabha.

In some villages, women focused on the issue of employment. After the agricultural season ends, many families have to migrate elsewhere in search of wage work. Women expressed the need to stop this migration and create employment opportunities within the village. They were also willing to learn new skills to make this possible.

At the Gram Sabha in Aswali Harsh village of Trimbakeshwar taluka, women raised the issue of water. Despite a pipeline, well, motor and other infrastructure being installed under the Jal Jeevan Mission, they asked why water was still not reaching their homes. The discussion brought several gaps in the implementation of the scheme to light. Although some steps have been taken towards

resolving the problem, the water supply is still not regular. Women continue to follow up on the issue.

Water: A Priority for Women



By the August Gram Sabha, women's expectations and enthusiasm had grown further. Several issues were discussed at the 15 August Gram Sabhas, but women had to repeatedly raise the issue of water. In some places, the Jal Jeevan Mission has been implemented, but because the work remains incomplete or has technical shortcomings, water still does not reach households. Even where water is available, it is not necessarily safe to drink. The water pots women carry on their heads, therefore, have not yet disappeared from their daily lives.

In Hirdi village, a proposal had been made to construct a bridge. Women objected to this and made their priority clear: "Resolve the drinking water problem before building the bridge."

In another village, farmers had demanded that silt be removed from a well used for agriculture. Women, however, demanded that the drinking-water well be cleaned and connected to the water tank.

Discussing Issues That Matter to People

Where Gram Sabhas were attended by women and men, teachers, local employees and others, a wide range of issues were discussed openly. From nutrition to education, and from water to roads, people raised issues that directly affect their everyday lives.

In some villages, residents expressed dissatisfaction with maize being distributed through the ration system. In many villages, people complained that the ready-to-cook khichdi mix provided as *Amrut Aahar* at Anganwadis was simply not fit to eat. People said they disliked it both for its taste and quality. The food continues to be supplied even though people do not want it and, as they pointed out, even animals will not eat it, resulting in wastage. Although these are matters that fall under the Central or State Government, the views expressed through the Gram Sabha by the people for whom these schemes are intended are worth taking note of.

Programmes implemented without considering all sides can also have unexpected and adverse consequences. In one village, the Gram Sabha discussed the experience of distributing goats to women as a means of creating employment. Women already had a heavy workload, and caring for the goats added to it. The responsibility of looking after the goats then fell on the children in the

family. As a result, children began going to the fields and forest instead of school, and their attendance became irregular. This issue, which emerged from a teacher's observations, made everyone stop and think.

In another village, teachers raised the issue of children's personal hygiene. They felt that children who ask to use the toilet after eating at school should be taught by their parents to relieve themselves in the morning. But the real issue was not the children's habits—it was the poor hygiene of the water at the school. An elderly villager suggested that the school's water tank should be cleaned and the quality of the water tested. His suggestion was equally valid.



In some villages, young people were also present at the Gram Sabha and actively participated in the discussions. In one village, young people shared their observations about the Anganwadi. Nutritious food is supplied for children and women, but there is no proper storage facility. The Anganwadi building is old, the roof leaks and the walls are damp. When sacks of food are simply stacked there, they get damaged. The young people pointed out the need for proper storage facilities. It is significant that villagers noticed these shortcomings in the school and Anganwadi and discussed them collectively.

Gram Sabhas become more meaningful when women and men from different age groups come together and participate in the discussion. At the August Gram Sabhas, people openly shared their experiences and concerns, and the range of issues raised was equally diverse. Discussions can help communities identify priorities and find solutions. Women's participation is giving this process a new and hopeful direction.

At the same time, follow-up is equally important. It is necessary to keep these discussions alive between two Gram Sabhas and to track whether the decisions taken are actually acted upon. This, too, is becoming an important part of the learning from this process.