



RAJIV GANDHI
INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY STUDIES



Educate, Organise & Transform: Tools for Emerging Grassroots Leadership

A Case Study of Gram Sabha meetings of Kambur
Panchayat, Madurai District, Tamil Nadu

October 2019



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Published by:

Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, New Delhi

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.1. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992	6
1.2. The Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act 1994	6
2. Profile of Kambur Panchayat	8
2.1. Prominent Livelihood activities	9
3. Inflection point for Kambur Panchayat	11
3.1. Jallikattu – A cultural phenomenon	11
3.2. Jallikattu Uprising and Kambur youth	12
4. Educate – Gaining Knowledge on Gram Sabha	14
4.1. Role of Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayati Raj Studies	14
5. Organise – Strategies for Mobilisation	16
5.1. Widening Social Capital	16
5.2. Engaging with children and youth	17
5.3. Rapport with Traditional Panchayat Leaders	18
5.4. Engaging with Farmers' Groups	19
5.5. Using Right to Information Act and PRIASoft	20
5.6. Effective Communication	21
5.7. Gender Inclusion	22
5.8. Including the excluded	24
6. Participation in Gram Sabha	26
6.1. Demands on Resolution for Proper Intimation	27
6.2. Excavating Financial Misappropriation	27
6.3. Negotiate with the Authorities	28
6.4. Record Participation	28
7. Transform – Outcomes of Mobilisation	30
7.1. Mass gathering at BDO Office	30
7.2. Collective action at Collector's office	31
7.3. Development activities through Solidarity	31
8. Conclusion	34
Evolutionary Map of Emergence of Grassroots Leadership	35
Annexure I	37



1

Introduction

Swami Vivekananda's firm belief in power of the youth to transform India seems to take shape in Kambur panchayat, Tamil Nadu. Driven by a group of local youngsters and forced by distress in livelihoods, people of this Gram Panchayat are beginning to organise themselves into something like a movement. As Swami Vivekananda once said "give me 100 energetic youths, I will transform India", a group of youngsters from Kambur village panchayat have taken it upon themselves to transform their village into a model village. Vexed by water scarcity and deteriorating livelihoods, their answer to institutional decay and administrative lethargy in local governance is Gram Sabha.

This descriptive case study appraises readers of the phenomenon of grass roots mobilisation in Kambur village panchayat which has led to active participation of people in institutional mechanisms. Loaded with knowledge of their rights and data on public expenditure, people of the panchayat now raise their issues and make legitimate demands on local government in Gram Sabha. In this study, the role of a group young people as leaders of this mobilisation takes centre stage. They capitalise on their individual strengths to build a well functioning team which is already delivering results. From effectively using legal provisions, to raising substantial funds from village community in India and abroad, to using social media platforms for information dissemination; the team of youngsters have a lot of lessons to offer in leadership to aspiring young in the country side.

1.1 The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992

Mahatma Gandhi's idea of swaraj or self rule/governance is an inspiration and guide to youngsters of Kambur panchayat. It calls for decentralised decision-making power and community-driven bottom approach to development. It can be said that 73rd Constitutional Amendment 1992 is closely aligned with the Mahatma's vision. The Act which added Article 243 to 243-O to the Constitution, provides for institution of Gram Sabha under Article 243-A. The Act defines Gram Sabha as a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to village comprised within the area of Panchayat at the village level. Gram Sabhas are empowered by enabling legislations at the state level. The participation of the villagers in the Gram Sabha is essential as to present a collective voice of the village community with regard to development activities to be carried out.

1.2 The Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act 1994

As per Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act 1994, at least 4 Gram Sabhas are organised every year. In Kambur and usually in most village panchayats, Gram Sabhas are held on January 26th, May 1st, August 15th, and October 2nd. The Act bestows following functions on the Gram Sabha:

- Approve the village plan;
- Approve village budget for the year;
- Approve the audit report on the Village Panchayat accounts of the previous year;
- Review the progress of the implementation of all schemes entrusted to the Village Panchayat;
- Approval of the beneficiaries selected and location of institutions and community facilities identified by the Village Panchayat;
- Review of the completed works executed in the previous year by Village Panchayat and scrutiny of the list of works under taken in the year by the Village Panchayat or by any Government Department and agency;
- Promotion of communal and social harmony among the various groups of people in the Village Panchayat;
- Mobilisation of voluntary labour, contribution in cash and kind for community welfare and development Programmes; and
- Examining annual statement of accounts and audit report of the Village Panchayat.

Village Panchayat is elected for a period of five years, however, since 2016, when tenure of last panchayats ended, elections have not been held in Tamil Nadu and there are no elected Panchayat members across the state. Instead, the panchayat secretary with the direction of Block Development Officer is carrying out panchayat functions and is also supposed facilitate the Gram Sabha. However, the participation of the villagers in the Gram Sabhas across the state has been meagre due to lack of awareness on Panchayati Raj Institutions. It is found that in many panchayats Gram Sabhas were conducted for sake of procedure and the signatures would later be collected from the innocent villagers by the panchayat secretary. In Kambur Gram Panchayat, the scenario of the Gram Sabhas was similar.



Village women interacting about the Gram Sabha Meeting

2

Profile of Kambur Panchayat

Kambur is one among the 26 village panchayats in Kottampatti block of Melur Taluk in Madurai District. It falls in Melur assembly constituency and Madurai Parliament Constituency. There are seven wards in nine hamlets in Kambur panchayat viz. A.Pudur, Alangampatti, Aivathanpatti, Chinnakarpurampatti, Kovilpatti, Periyakarpurampatti, Perumakkipudur, Kambur and Thenkudipatti.

As per 2011 Census, Kambur has 1985 households and a total of 9190 inhabitants (5025 men and 4165 women). It has a literacy rate of 85 per cent. It has fifty temples, one mosque, and one Christian prayer hall. Out of 1985 households, 3205 ration cards have been distributed. It has 12 polling booths in which 2966 men and 3056 women were eligible to cast their votes from this Panchayat.



View of Kambur Panchayat area

2.1 Prominent Livelihood activities

2.1.1. Agriculture and Periya Aruvi System

Agriculture has traditionally been the predominant livelihood source for inhabitants of Kambur panchayat. The dominant caste community has owned agricultural lands, whereas the landless work as daily labours in the agricultural fields. The agricultural activity in the area, however, drastically reduced after construction of the Periya aruvi reservoir.

The Periya Aruvi stream originates from Alagarmalai Hills in Dindugal district in Tamil Nadu and runs through Melur taluk feeding 25 tanks in a series. In 1965, the Periya Aruvi reservoir was constructed on the stream. The reservoir is located upstream of the 25 tanks originally fed by the stream. The Executive Engineer, Periyar Division who took up the investigation of the scheme, in his wisdom, had opined that the irrigation in downstream areas (where Kambur is located) will be affected if the reservoir is constructed. Kambur Panchayat is located in the lower roguery irrigation area. However, the project was approved and the Periya Aruvi reservoir was constructed.

2.1.1.1. *Impact of the Reservoir¹*

While a section of farmers in the direct irrigation area may have benefitted, farmers in the tank fed areas have suffered in terms of overall water availability. Over the years, the Kambur farmers who were dependent on Periya Aruvi stream for their livelihood have experienced major disruption that has impacted all spheres of social life in that area. They contend that their tanks performed well prior to the construction of this reservoir and they were better off without it.

There are about 25 tanks, which are supposed to receive water from the reservoir. The construction of the reservoir affected more people in the tank fed area, and not just farmers:

- More than 10 of them have become completely dysfunctional they were solely dependent on the Periya Aruvi stream impacting large part of total area of around 670 acres earlier irrigated.
- The water level in the wells has gone down in all the villages. A rough estimate is that more than 500 wells are in distress in these original tank areas creating a drinking water shortage.

¹ Excerpt from “Study on Customary Rights and their Relation to Modern Tank Management in Tamil Nadu, India” (2004), by DHAN Foundation.

- The crop losses are increasing year by year due to reduced flow in the stream.
- Encroachments in the tank beds, bunds, supply channel areas have occurred because all these parts of the tanks have been rendered useless.
- Storage capacity of tanks has reduced because of complete siltation or weed growth and neglect.
- Lands are increasingly becoming uncultivable and fallow in the tank irrigated areas because of the failure of groundwater in addition to failure of the tank ayacuts.
- The economic development of tank fed villages had come to a standstill because of the decline of agriculture. The standard of living has dipped.

The farmers of downstream areas who depended on tanks fed by the stream have not only lost major source of their livelihood. As irrigated portion of their lands reduced, they have been unable to sustain their livestock; and a state of indebtedness has even forced farmers to sell their lands. It is notable that the area receives enough rainfall to generate adequate flow in the stream to fill the tanks in a normal year. However, since the flow is also regulated by the reservoir, farmers cannot benefit from a natural advantage. As a consequence, many inhabitants of Kambur migrated to other places in search of employment and settled elsewhere.

2.1.2. Alternate livelihoods

On account of rocky terrain, quarrying activity in the region has supported many of families in Kambur panchayat area in the 1990s and 2000s. Quarrying too, however, has declined in last decade due to licensing and operational issues. People work at construction sites; and some have migrated to Tirupur to work as labours in garment industries. A considerable number of youths migrated to Gulf Countries to work as crane operators, drivers, foreman, etc. Educated youths are employed as engineers in cities. The illiterates migrate to Erode district to avail cooking as a seasonal job during festivals and other local ceremonial functions.

3

Inflection Point for Kambur Panchayat

The meetings of Gram Sabha of Kambur until 2017 were insignificant and organised like any other Panchayats. The Gram Sabhas were neither organised with any objectives, nor any constructive decisions came out as the villagers were not aware of the functions and power of the Gram Sabha. To stick to the procedure under the law, the panchayat president (until they were in power) up to 2016 and subsequently the panchayat secretary organised pretend Gram Sabha meetings and the resolutions were sent to the district administration regularly. The nature of Gram Sabha meetings and participation therein at Kambur changed dramatically after youths from the village participated in Jallikattu (Bull-taming Sport) protest which was a historical event in Tamil Nadu.

3.1 Jallikattu – A cultural phenomenon

In Tamil Nadu, Jallikattu has been a warrior sport, where a man matches wit and sinew with a raging bull and grabs a small bag of coins or Jalli, tied to its horns. It is about courage, masculinity, and above all, cultural ethos. Jallikattu is majorly held in four districts Madurai (where Kambur is located), Trichy, Theni and Dindigul.

Jallikattu faced its first hurdle in 2004 when PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and AWBI (Animal Welfare Board of India) came together against it. AWBI had stated that it is nothing but animal cruelty on the bulls. On May 7, 2014, a two-judge bench banned Jallikattu. After the two-judge bench verdict, this issue came up again in front of the apex court. The bench eventually dismissed the review petition filed by the Tamil Nadu

government to lift the ban imposed on Jallikattu in 2014. Hence a fresh appeal was filed by the state to allow Tamilians to organise Jallikattu. In November 2016, the Supreme Court upheld the ban and declined to issue an interim order to allow Jallikattu just before Pongal festival.

3.2 Jallikattu Uprising and Kambur youth

This ban gave an opportunity to the youth of Tamil Nadu to express their disappointment towards State and Central governments. Jallikattu had become a symbol of Tamil pride. As a sign of their protest, a handful of youths started their protest in January 2017 at Marina Beach, Chennai, which grew to thousands in couple of days. Jallikattu protests quickly spread to other parts of Tamil Nadu as well. There was mass gathering in every village to mark their protest against banning of Jallikattu. The entire state of Tamil Nadu was standstill by a shutdown of business firms, education institutions for five days by the protest of students, youths and other sections demanding immediate staging of the cultural event of the Bull-taming sport.

Selvaraj, a young man from Kambur Gram Panchayat worked at Chennai and used to visit his village only for important occasions. In January 2017, he visited the village to celebrate Pongal, which is a major cultural festival across the state. Every year the bulls from Kambur would participate in Jallikattu in Alanganallur, the epicentre of the Jallikattu. The youth from Kambur would also participate in the Jallikattu every year. However, Selvaraj found that this year the festival would not be as colourful as it was in the previous years as Jallikattu was banned at Alanganallur, and in the rest of the places in the state. A group of youngsters from Kambur, under the leadership of Selvaraj and Dinesh, another educated young man from Kambur, participated in the protests with enthusiasm.



“ When we assembled in Jallikattu uprising, we didn't know that this would motivate us to work jointly for our Village Panchayat development. ”

- Selvaraj

Like others, a group of youngsters, led by Selvaraj and Dinesh from Kambur also participated in Jallikattu movement in Alanganallur, Madurai district to get back their legitimate right to celebrate the Bull-taming sport every year during Pongal festival. The protest was not organised by any political party in particular, rather emerged as purely voluntary participation of people. Many political leaders and civil society activists visited the gathering and delivered motivational speeches.

These youths from Kambur, too, listened to the forceful speeches of these orators. Many speakers mentioned the power of Gram Sabha that a resolution passed in the Gram Sabha was almost equal to the order of Supreme Court. They further recommended the youth to emphasise to legitimate Jallikattu through the Gram Sabha meetings.



Kambur youth participating in Jallikattu Uprising

4

Educate - Gaining Knowledge on Gram Sabha

Participation in Jallikattu had opened Kambur youths to recognising strengths of institutional mechanisms in presenting collective voice to the administration. After going back to his routine official work at Chennai, Selvaraj started collecting reading materials about the power and functions of the Gram Sabha. He gained adequate knowledge of the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992. He understood why this amendment is considered as a defining moment in the history of decentralisation of political power. He further came to know about the vision of Rajiv Gandhi, former Prime Minister, behind placing Panchayat Raj Institutions as an instrument of unlocking local forces in development through decentralisation of political power. Subsequently, he read Part IV - Section 1 of the Tamil Nadu Government Gazette Extraordinary, dated the 8th November 1994, Part IV Section 2 of the Tamil Nadu Government Gazette Extraordinary, dated the 28th November and The Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act 1994. He visited many libraries and found Gandhiji's idea of Gram Swaraj (Village self-governance) was the root of this 73rd Amendment.

4.1 Role of Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayati Raj Studies

While deepening their knowledge on Panchayati Raj, Selvaraj and other young people from Kambur read books written by Dr G. Palanithurai, the then Rajiv Gandhi Chair for Panchayati Raj Studies and a Professor at Gandhigram University, Gandhigram, Dindigul. They watched his interviews on YouTube

where he dealt with issues of participatory democracy at the grassroots and provided in depth information on relevant laws. Thereon, between February and April 2018, they had numerous telephonic discussions and attended many of his meetings on grassroots democracy. Guidance from experienced and knowledgeable Panchayati Raj proponent proved immensely useful for these youngsters to understand value of grass roots participation in institutions of local self governance.

Armed with this new found knowledge, Selvaraj, along with a few youths whom he found shared interest of transforming state of affairs in their village with, realised the importance of mobilising the people. To make Gram Sabha meetings active and vibrant in order to bring out transparency in the development activities carried out by the government, it was crucial to mobilise people to participate in Gram Sabha. Selvaraj rose up to the occasion, to take the role of mobilising all the stakeholders and identified a team of volunteers to accompany him in the task. The team identified certain strategies to mobilise the stakeholders, which started with building trust of villagers in the team of youngsters and their intentions.



RGICS Team in discussion with the youth volunteers

5

Organise - Strategies for Mobilisation

It was, indeed, a major challenge for the team to mobilise the masses to the Gram Sabha meetings. They planned and carefully adopted different strategies to mobilise different sections of the village society. In order to organise people, they scientifically chalked out their strengths which enabled them to map out their strategies. All the members of the team of youngsters had their task cut out. While deploying specific members to address specific groups, the team decided to organise the farmers through farmers' organisations; convince traditional panchayat leaders to make space for and support young leaders; making use of RTI effectively to obtain information about their panchayat; mobilise the youth working abroad through electronic media; include self-help women and create a space for the scheduled caste in the process.

5.1 Widening Social Capital

The team started strengthening their rapport with the local people by helping them during their social gatherings. Participating in local religious festivals was an opportunity which the team exploited and slowly widened their social capital within community. They contributed by installing water stalls, distributing buttermilk, by regulating the devotees, cleaning the temple surroundings, distributing Kool (traditional village staple food) etc. Since many members of the team are well educated, they would assist villagers in their mundane chores of filing forms, getting identity documents, availing benefits from various government schemes, etc.

The team of youngsters started projecting their vision of the village by voluntary initiatives. For example, tree plantation in the school by the team yielded major attraction among the students who were given the responsibility of maintaining the trees. The team of youngsters has expressed vision to make inhabitants of the village responsible for its sustainable development instead of the government.

5.2 Engaging with children and youth

5.2.1. Tuition Centre



Learning at the tuition centre

A permanent tuition centre is being run by the team for the students of the panchayat area since September 2018. More than 30 students are in regular attendance at this tuition centre, where Selvaraj, one of the team members, helps them in their studies. Almost all the students of the village have benefitted from this initiative. Few of the participated in the Gram Sabha meetings and shared their learning with other kids as well.



“ I thought of stopping my child's education as I was not able to spend huge money to arrange private tuition. But the tuition centre run by Kambur youth is like an 'Akshaya Patra' for our knowledge-hungry children. My child's improvement in studies was made possible only through this tuition centre. ”

- Banu, Mother of student Sharmila from Kambur tuition centre

5.2.2. Sports activities



Village children playing carrom in VAO office premises

The team organised sports events for children and the youth of all the seven habitations. A portion of VAO (Village Administrative Officer) office was used to play indoor games. Financial resources for procuring sports equipment were raised by the team of youngsters. These activities have helped them gain affirmative fame among other youth of the panchayat.

The team collected funds from their friends who worked abroad mostly in Gulf countries (Refer Section 5.6) to address issues with common physical infrastructure without expecting the Government to initiate such repairing works. The team also organised several camps to enable the poor to access different government schemes like old age pension, etc. along with regular awareness campaigns on health and hygiene.

5.3 Rapport with Traditional Panchayat Leaders

Every panchayat has some traditional panchayat leaders. These leaders have occupied the role of decision-makers in taking any important decisions for the welfare of the village from time immemorial. A few from respected families in the village would be designated as traditional panchayat leaders. Since people respect traditional panchayats, the Gram Panchayat would consult these leaders for any important social, religious activities it initiates. Led by



Strategic planning with traditional Panchayat leaders

Dinesh, the team of youngsters met the traditional panchayat leaders soliciting their support to make the Gram Sabha meetings participative. As traditional panchayat leaders are widely respected in the village, the team requested the leaders to exhort villagers to attend the meetings.

The traditional Panchayat leaders, who are normally not interested in contesting elections, and electoral representation, evinced their support to the team's activities and appealed the villagers to attend the Gram Sabhas.

5.4 Engaging with Farmers' Groups

They were 27 farmers' groups promoted in this panchayat. Kumar, one among the team, was a member of a farmers' group formed. He mobilised all the farmers by visiting each farmer's house to explain the importance of their participation in the Grama Sabha.

Kumar, from Alangampatti hamlet of Kambur panchayat, graduated in political science from Madurai Kamaraj University. As agriculture is his family's long-time occupation, he also continued cultivation on their own 3-acre land. Simultaneously, he was working as 'Field Organiser' with Arvind Eye Hospital. He had organised several free eye camps in many panchayats around Madurai. This is how he developed his interest in social activities. He promoted farmers' group and got support from DHAN Foundation (A local NGO, working among poor farmers). He formed as many as 6 such farmers' groups in this panchayat. Kumar's intervention was significant in making social welfare schemes of the government, especially agriculture department, available to farmer's groups.



“ I wanted to get a government job but not happened yet. Though I was not a government servant, people jokingly recognize me as a government agriculture officer because I tried to tap all the government schemes for the farmers. ”

- Kumar

As Kambur panchayat faced water crisis due to which their agriculture land had become futile and a small portion of cultivation was done only through rainwater, he developed a 'Farm Pond' on his land with the support of DHAN and government. This helped him cultivate groundnut, pulses, and paddy on his land. Subsequently, throughout 2016 and 2017, he supported other farmers to build farm ponds which have evidently enhanced poor farmers' incomes. This helped him create a good rapport with the farmers. Banking on Kumar's efforts and rapport, the team conducted a door to door campaign requesting all the farmers to attend the meeting. This engagement with farmers and concern about their issues led to huge turnout of farmers to the Gram Sabha meetings, in a significant achievement for the team.

5.5 Using Right to Information Act and PRIASoft

After attending some Gram Sabha meetings, the team members suspected some financial inconsistency in the expenditure statement read by the panchayat secretary. However, they did not have any documentary evidence to prove the same. The team members could not get hold of a copy of the resolution and receipt and payment documents. At that time, Selvaraj, Dinesh, and other team members came to know about one Mr. Hakkim, an activist, who challenged irregularities in the government's financial transactions in Madurai by collecting information and data through application under Right to Information (RTI) Act.

The team got in touch with Mr. Hakkim and learned about using RTI to acquire information about the expenditure shown by the panchayat officials in March 2018. Apart from sharing knowledge on RTI, Hakkim also introduced the team to PRIASoft (Panchayat Raj Institution Accounting Software). For Selvaraj, Dinesh, and other team members, PRIASoft was a treasure of information that they were desperately looking for. Using the software, in March 2018, the team unearthed various fake expenses shown by the officials which were approved by improperly organised Gram Sabha with negligible participation from people.

The team considered it their responsibility to make the people of village aware of misappropriation of panchayat funds by the officials. However, they were

not sure how effective the team would be to convince people. The greatest apprehension was in people's faith in the government system as against a bunch of youngsters. The young people from the village, who were convinced of the corruption by the panchayat secretary, joined the team members to a sit-in at the Block Development Officer's (BDO) office (Ref. Section 7.1). The stand of the team members was vindicated in Gram Sabha of May 1, 2018 (Ref. Section 6.2).

5.6 Effective Communication

In order to raise awareness about corrupt practices of panchayat officials and issue being faced by the village community, the team started a WhatsApp group in February 2017 and started sharing information about the panchayat expenditures collected by various sources. Many of the smartphone users from the village became members of the group who, in turn, added other people from Kambur working outside the district, state and even abroad. All the activities carried out by the team were also posted on Facebook with pictures. The social media and communication is largely handled by Marutharaj, one of the team members. This not only helped the cause of Kambur youngsters, but also brought them recognition and support from all over the state. These fora also inspired youth of other villages, which got in touch with Kambur team to replicate similar activities in their villages.

Marvel of Marutharaj doesn't stop there. The youth were soon short of requisite financial strength to move forward. Marutharaj alias Silupan had worked in Saudi Arabia and Dubai. He met with an accident when he had come to India that made him unfit to go back to Gulf countries to resume his work. Using his connections with people from Kambur working abroad, who decided to create a WhatsApp platform for Kambur NRIs, Marutharaj was able to bring people from abroad under one umbrella who pledged their financial support to the movement promoted by the youth. Marutharaj's efforts of bringing all youth working aboard together are well appreciated in the community.



“ My village people did not know World Bank or Asian Development Bank, but if you ask anyone 'where is foreign bank', everybody will point towards me their index finger. I am called as 'foreign bank' because of my efforts to raise money from our youth friends working overseas. ”

- Marutharaj

With effective communication, the movement of Kambur became international, when Kambur NRIs expressed their interest to support the movement financially in April 2018. Kambur NRIs started organising meetings on holidays, in their respective countries and interact with each other to express solidarity to and assist the team in Kambur on a regular basis. They raised large financial resources from among themselves. Their financial assistance has gone a long way in bearing the expenses of hiring the public address system for campaigning and to provide refreshments for the participants who attended the meetings, among others.

5.7 Gender Inclusion

Quite soon into their initiative, the team observed dismally low participation of women in Gram Sabhas. The team decided to mobilise women to scale up their participation in the process. The women of the village had regularly attended the parent teachers' association meeting and had already been formed into various self-help groups (SHGs). In January 2018, Vignesh and Nathiya, two members of the team, decided to carry the mantle of mobilising the women.

5.7.1. Mothers of the students

Vignesh works as a teacher in the local higher secondary school. He is a favourite among students and is popular among parent community. He personally knew the mothers of the students as he was involved in ensuring their attendance in regular Parents Teacher Association meetings. Using his position as an advantage, he informed women in PTA meetings about the importance of the Gram Sabha, and that women's participation in the meetings was crucial to raise pertinent issues in front of the authorities.

5.7.2. Women Self Help Group Members

Nathiya is a native of Kovilpatti, a small hamlet in Kambur consisting of 60 Households. She is one of the office bearers of women SHG. Nathiya made immense contribution in mobilising women of the panchayat to participate in meetings. She ran a small milk collection centre where she met all the women



“ It was really challenging to organize women collectively, but once it was done, their interest and participation level keeps going on and on. ”

- Nathiya



Women eagerly participating in Gram Sabha meeting

almost every day. Through her centre, she informed women about importance of the presence of women in the meetings and explained the Government's direction of having made the Women Self Groups' active participation in the Gram Sabha meetings mandatory. She urged women to join and convinced them that solutions for major issues such as water problem, power cuts would come only if the women participated in high numbers and raised these issues at the meetings.

Priya and Vellaiyammal from Kambur and Eswari from Chinnakarpooranpatti also actively mobilised women from their respective hamlets as they are all

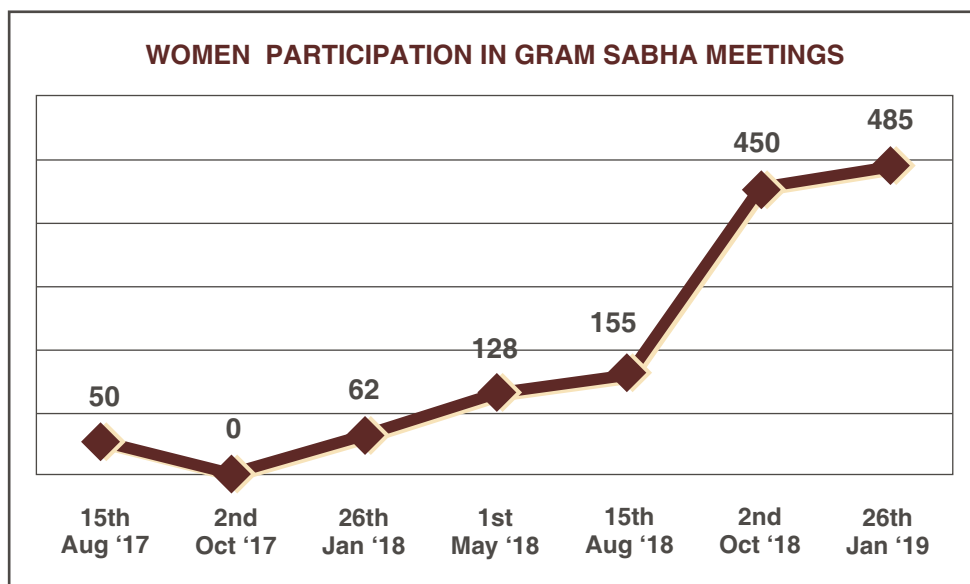


Chart 1: Increasing Trend of Women Participation in Gram Sabha

active member of women SHGs. Around 27 women SHGs function effectively in Kambur Panchayat.

The participation of women increased dramatically with efforts of Vignesh, Nathiya, Priya, Vellaiyammal, and Eswari, which is a great achievement for the team. The women's increased participation did not remain confined to Gram Sabha, who now also started participating in all the events organised by the team of youngsters. It points towards greater gender empowerment in Kambur.

5.8 Including the excluded

After Gram Sabha meeting on May 1, 2018, the team realised that participation from members of the scheduled caste (SC) community in the village was not very high. It was deemed necessary to include the community in the process for a consolidated and sustained stand against government officials. Also, since Selvaraj and other youth leaders believed in the holistic development of their panchayat, the sufferings of this oppressed community had to be addressed.

The SC dwellings are usually isolated from other Caste-Hindus habitations. The Caste-Hindus would not enter their localities as it would relegate their social status. This stigma was broken by the team by including the youth from

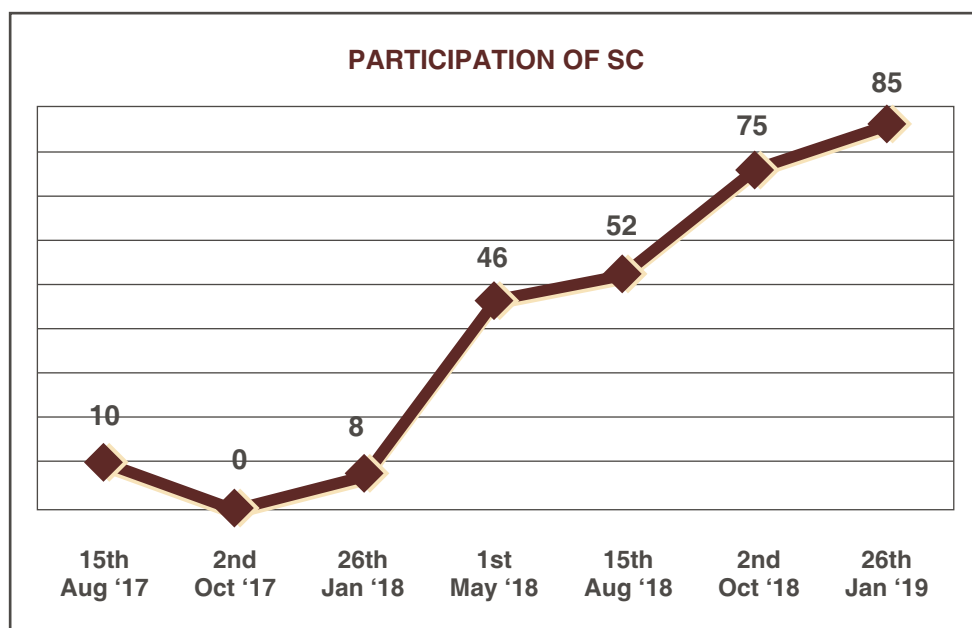


Chart 2: Increasing participation of SC in Gram Sabha

SC community within their leadership layer. Some of the interested scheduled caste youth were included in their team and motivated to enhance the SC participation in the ensuing Gram Sabha meetings.

The number of SC villagers' participation in Grama Sabha moved up significantly with the voluntary efforts of SC youth who became associated with the team. This group prepared a pamphlet indicating the unrealistic accounts shown by the panchayat officials at the time of May 1, 2018 meeting. These pamphlets were distributed to each household that eventually attracted almost one-third of the population to attend in the Jan 26, 2019 Gram Sabha meeting!



An active youth volunteer mobilising the village women

6

Participation in Gram Sabha

Since, mobilising people to attend Gram Sabha was not enough, the team not only organised themselves but also educated and organised people to participate in the meetings. Before every Gram Sabha, the team organises preparatory meetings in all the habitations of the panchayat to discuss issues before hand and finalise the ones to be raised in the Gram Sabha. This process has gradually taken shape, starting with a few young people of the village in 2017 to almost entire population of the panchayat in 2018. It has yielded good results in making Gram Sabha an effective mechanism of engagement with increased attendance and participation.

Participation by people in Gram Sabha was greatly influenced by members of the team. While engaging with different groups was a strategy deployed, perhaps it was the dedication and sense of purpose of the team members which also had an impact. For example, Selvaraj had been serving as a co-operative bank employee worked at Chennai, about 500 km away from Kambur. Staying true to his calling, he availed a prolonged leave of absence mid-2018 and engaged with people of his panchayat, especially the young, directly (Refer Section 5). On witnessing his sacrifice of a coveted public sector job and a stable pay check, villagers were motivated to contribute towards the cause. Selvaraj and all other team members' act of working for more than just self-gain yielded admiration, respect, and trust from the other youth of the panchayat.

This section throws light on the nature and magnitude of participation exhibited by people of Kambur panchayat in the Gram Sabha meetings from early 2018 onwards.

6.1 Demands on Resolution for Proper Intimation

Before shifting to Kambur, Selvaraj had carried out informal discussions with his friends over the phone urging them to actively participate in the Gram Sabha meeting being held on Jan 26, 2018 and mobilise the villagers to do so too. Unfortunately, there was no visible sign of the meeting being organised as the secretary had already decided to list the resolutions get them signed by the panchayat constituents as per his routine style. However, on that day, the group of youngsters pressured the secretary into organising the meeting, and it took place regardless of meagre attendance as there was no time to give proper intimation about the meeting to the villagers. The last-minute nature of this meeting encouraged the participants to pass a resolution to organise the forthcoming Gram Sabha meetings with prior information. The motion was passed and solemnised by the twenty-five young people who attended the meeting having been inspired by Selvaraj.

6.2 Excavating Financial Misappropriation

Having unearthed massive information of numerous financial irregularities through PRIASoft (Refer Section 5.5), the youth were well-prepared for the meeting held on May 1, 2018. Meanwhile, learning of Mahatma Gandhi's concept of an ideal village wherein self sufficiency exists with regard to provisions for all necessities of life such as food, clothing, clean water, sanitation, housing, education and other requirements had had a deep impact on the youths. Inspired by these ideas, youngsters had decided to raise their questions on basic amenities such as street lamps, road, community hall, ration card, etc. at the Gram Sabha.

On account of prior preparation and planning by the team, the May 1, 2018 Gram Sabha saw a huge gathering. On being asked questions as to what works/ activities had been implemented by the Government for the development of the Panchayat, the Secretary listed out details of all the activities. However, Dinesh, one of the team members, pointed out that, among those declared by the secretary, many of the works had not been carried out in Kambur. The women were astonished to learn that the panchayat spent Rs 19,300 for buying Rangoli powder! The entire village gradually discovered the full scale of financial record manipulation done by the secretary, which vindicated the stand of the team members. As the expenditure of 'fake' works was shown in the accounts declared by the secretary, the annoyed youth, on behalf of the entire village, demanded for the details of the panchayat account statement. However, the secretary ignored them and hastily completed the meeting. The people did not get a copy of the account statement.



“ When I heard my own voice [over PA system] in Gram Sabha meetings, it gave me immense pleasure and [I] felt like [I was] born again with a purpose of living for the oppressed ones. ”

- Dinesh

Then Dinesh and other youth demanded that the Block Development Officer (BDO) be made present in the Gram Sabha on the same day. The officials tried to underplay the demand. However, the firm gathering did not disperse and stayed put for several hours without breaking for refreshments or food. Eventually, the BDO arrived at the spot and tried to assuage people with promises of further action. The youth demanded immediate departmental action against the panchayat secretary under the charges of corruption. The BDO, however, refused their demands forcing them to inform the media and approach higher authorities for departmental action. The issue was published by The Hindu newspaper.

6.3 Negotiate with the Authorities

The youth decided to follow Mahatma Gandhi's method of Satyagraha in this endeavour for justice for the villagers. They realised that they need to develop a long-term vision to transform the system. They clearly understood that transformation is not only a radical change, but also a planned and incremental change. They knew negotiating with the authorities was essential, but all their efforts to meet Block Development Officer and other officials did not bear fruit. No one took the issues raised by villagers seriously and no further action was geared up by the officials. In the October 2, 2018 Gram Sabha, the youth then demanded a discussion with District Collector (DC) who turned out to be more receptive of their complaints. The DC spoke to the youth over the phone and assured appropriate action against the Secretary.

6.4 Record Participation

The participation of the members in the Gram Sabha held on October 2, 2018 rose sharply with a record attendance of 750 including several women, scheduled caste, children and almost all the youth. Their active participation became a highlight in the newspapers as the solidarity among the villagers evidently showcased their confidence in getting things done for their panchayat. The amazing involvement of the people assured the youth that their efforts were not in vain and that they could achieve their dream of transforming their village through strong community engagement.

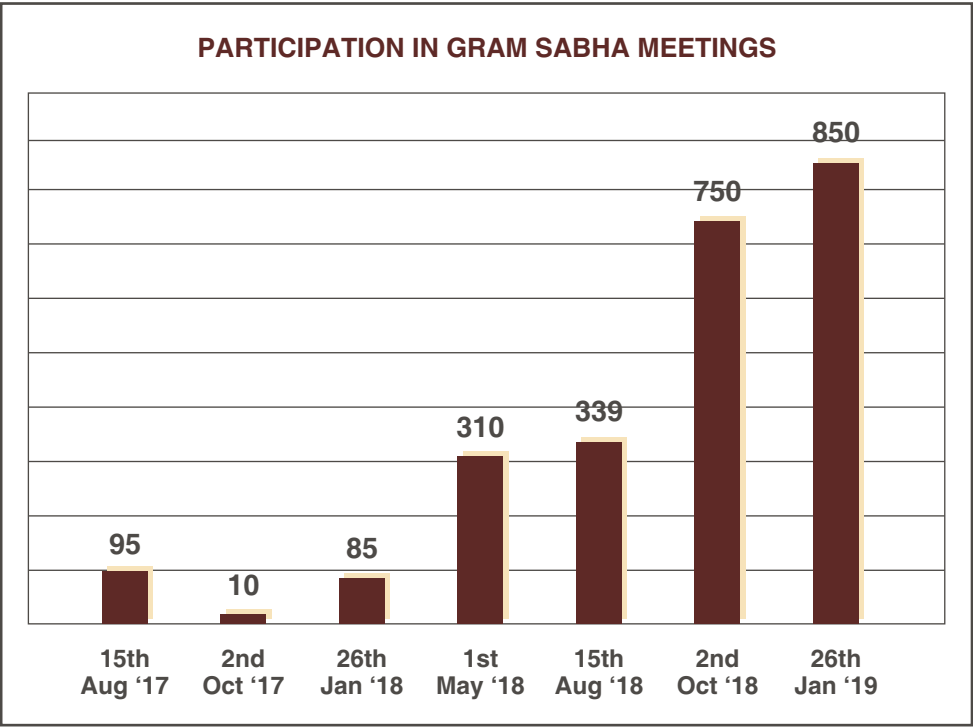


Chart 3: Increasing participation in Gram Sabha



Villagers attending Gram Sabha Meeting

7

Transform - Outcome of Mobilisation

While increased participation in Gram Sabha meetings itself is a transformation for any village, it's essentially a symptom of organisation and mobilisation of people. In Kambur, this was facilitated by the knowledge and leadership of the team of youngsters. While long term outcomes are still far, this section depicts how methods of engaging with the system have changed for people of Kambur.

7.1 Mass gathering at BDO Office

In March 2018, the team had unearthed numerous irregularities in Panchayat functioning through PRIASoft. The team used this information to mobilise people and demand action against the Panchayat Secretary. However, the efforts of the people yielded no concrete result from the BDO office. Rather, the Panchayat Secretary intimidated the youngsters to withdraw their obstinate demand of action against him. Many members of the team received life-threatening calls from him. Meanwhile, the Panchayat Secretary was transferred to his own native village and no action was taken against him for financial irregularities. The team gathered a huge number of villagers in front of BDO office and demanded withdrawal of the Secretary's transfer and to initiate action against him. The BDO tried to pacify the agitated youth, but to no effect. Eventually, the District Collector was forced to speak with the team members over the phone and promised to take necessary action against the corrupt staff.

7.2 Collective action at Collector's office

The District Collector at Madurai holds grievance redressal meetings at his office every Monday. As there was no further action after their telephone conversation with District Collector, the youth of Kambur planned to collectively participate in that meeting as a show of their unity. A group of around 30 people from Kambur, including, women, elderly and the young petitioned the Collector demanding a thorough enquiry into the alleged misappropriation of funds by the Panchayat Secretary and other officials in the village.



Report of Agitation at the Collector's office

Hundreds of youth, women, children and aged boldly extended their support to this agitation. This collective action became a major success for this youth group. The next day, the entire state came to know the selfless efforts of the youth as this information was captured in all the leading Newspapers.

7.3 Development activities through Solidarity

The business as usual of conducting improper Gram Sabhas by the Kambur Panchayat Secretary was challenged on 15th August 2017. There was a vibrant gathering of 95 villagers in Gram Sabha on that day. Among them were, many new, serious and young faces glowing with the motivation to actively participate in the meetings. As many as seventy-five people who were mobilised by the team eagerly participated in this Gram Sabha meeting, a first for many of them. The youth, overcoming the caste barrier, expressed their solidarity in this meeting as they raised many questions about the role of the Panchayat office in implementing various development schemes. This meeting proved was an eye-opener for many villagers. They understood that the Gram Sabha was an open forum where all the common problems of the panchayat could be discussed to arrive at amicable solutions.

After mid-2017, the villagers took active interest in the issues of the village, and engaged with the authorities to find solutions for them, also raising them in Gram Sabha when needed. Following are few instances where active participation of the villagers in affairs of the village, with consistent efforts of the the team of youngsters, yielded good results.

7.3.1. Restoration of fallen electricity pole

To systematically address issues with panchayat's development activities, a small group of young villagers was enlisted by the villagers to investigate the issues that persisted in their panchayat from time to time. There were several cases in which the youth were involved in the rectifications of the infrastructure issues in their panchayat region.

In June 2018, the issue of a collapsed electricity pole, which went unnoticed by the department of electricity, was brought to the notice of these youth. The youth, having attended the Gram Sabha meetings, learnt the functions of different government departments, and their role and functions. Mr. Hakkim, the RTI activist from Madurai, had trained the youth on making complaints online. The information about the indifference of the electricity department was circulated by the group of youngsters through social media and the picture of the fallen electricity pole was sent to the head of electricity department online. The same information was also passed on to the media. Thanks to the sustained efforts of the youth of Kambur, the electricity pole, which was damaged from many months, was rectified by the department within a day.

7.3.2. Completion of an unfinished road

Another infrastructural issue involved the road connecting the panchayat from the main road. It was left unfinished and the asphaltting work was not completed. The unfinished road created a nuisance for the two-wheeler riders who were mostly the youth, riding to nearby places for their jobs. The school children who were dropped by two-wheelers should pass by a cloud of dust formed due to the unfinished road work. A heated of argument between the officials and the youth took place in the Gram Sabha meeting in August 2018 regarding the inconvenience that villagers faced due to this issue. The youth shared this information with the media and the story was published in the newspaper also. Soon enough, the concerned department initiated adequate actions and the road work, pending for a month, was completed within a few days.

7.3.3. Repairing the water motor

Owing to water scarcity in the region, a few water motors had been fitted in Kambur panchayat to extract groundwater, a major source of drinking water. In February 2018, a motor developed a technical snag and stopped pulling water. The people lodged complaint multiple times to the panchayat office, but the issue was not addressed. The information was then passed to the youth. The team of youngsters arranged for the tools themselves and repaired the motor at a reasonable cost. This was a strong of evidence for the people to know the earnest involvement of the youth in the development of the Panchayat.

8

Conclusion

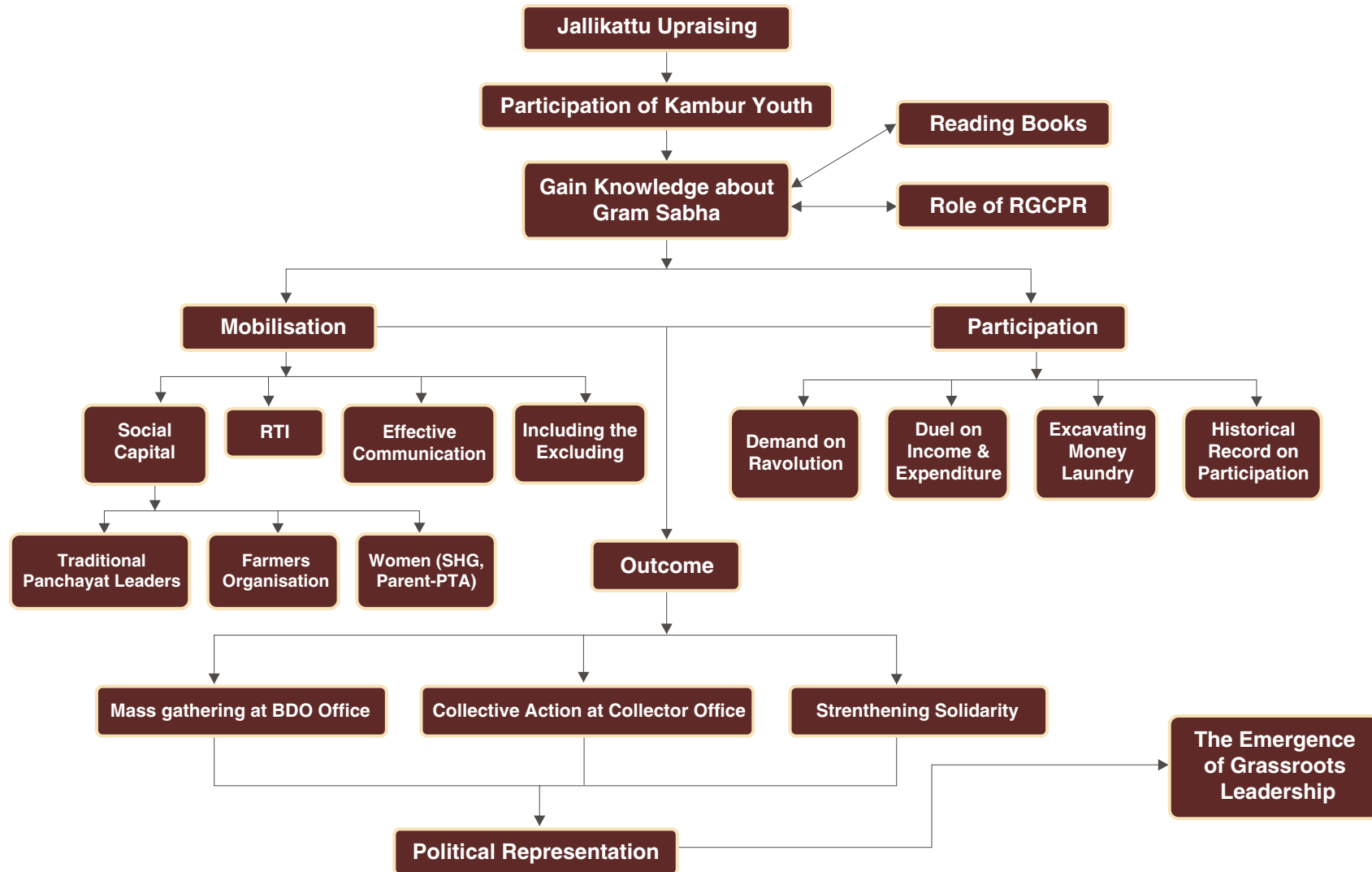
The youth of Kambur may not be popular as they serve an unfamiliar village, but their actions to mobilise the local population to move forward with their firm objective of bringing transparency in the panchayat's activities and ending corruption at the local level is no mean feat. The long term impacts and outcomes may be far, nonetheless, the case of Kambur is special on various counts. It has shown a way to achieve what the proponents of Panchayati Raj have only dreamt of, all the while addressing major issues with functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

The case highlights importance of educating people, especially the young, about the functioning of PRIs, various platforms and mechanisms of collecting crucial information related to government functioning such as the RTI and PRIASoft. Based on this education, it requires leadership, provided by the team of youngsters in Kambur, to organise people by eliminating the fear of the system, as manifest in the growing number of participants in Kambur Gram Sabhas. The process of transformation of this village panchayat is underway, and the leaders have displayed the intent and the vision that they are working to achieve.

Thanks to the young leaders, the Kambur panchayat movement, if one may call it that, has addressed key challenges to PRIs. One, the issue of inclusiveness, with their focus on all sections of the society including women, the scheduled castes, even the traditional panchayat leaders; two, the challenge of accountability by making use of RTI and PRIASoft and raising prepared questions in the Gram Sabha; and three, the effectiveness of PRIs established by demonstrating that participation in Gram Sabha does lead to change, and eventually and hopefully, to transformation.

The team of youngsters in Kambur were neither vested with power nor held a political position to administer their panchayat but still worked to maintain

Evolutionary Map of Emergence of Grassroots Leadership



transparent, service-focused local governance. This is a credible example of grassroots leadership. The leadership provided by these youngsters is a monument of their sacrifice, risk-taking attitude and emphatic spirit of teamwork. It has enabled the villagers to envisage an attractive future for themselves and for the entire panchayat.



Mr Elango explaining the youth the necessity of their political representation in January 2019

Professor Palanithurai and Mr Elango, an eminent rural scientist and a grassroots leader, advised these youths to contest in the ensuing panchayat election to be able to speed up the development activities of their panchayat.

Recognising value in their suggestions, the team of youngsters has decided to contest in local body elections. Chinnathambi, a youth from this team with the support of the team, already filed his nomination in the declared Panchayati Raj election, which has since been postponed.

Grassroots democracy is ensured when leaders emerge from their own local area with a thirst to serve to their own community without discrimination. The near future may see formal representation of these Kambur youngsters in the local governance. The successful achievements of Kambur youths will sooner or later become a benchmark for nearby panchayats. Hopefully, the people, and especially the youths, of other panchayats learn the lessons in grassroots democracy that Kambur has to offer.

Annexure I

List of Youth Team volunteers at Kambur Panchayat


Sl. No	Name of the Youth	Sl. No	Name of the Youth
<i>Kambur</i>		<i>Alangampatti</i>	
1	Selvaraj	23	Kumar
2	Vijayaraj	24	Dinesh
3	Thangapandi	25	Vignesh
4	Vahap	26	Dhanabalan
5	Boomi (a) Adaikan	27	Jeyaraman
6	Siluppan (a) Marutharaj	28	Karuppiyah
7	Chinnaraj (Qatar)	<i>Periakarpooranpatti</i>	
8	Kannan (Qatar)	29	Sethupathi (Madhya Pradesh)
9	Karthik (Dubai)	30	Mohanraj
10	Sivakumar	31	Alagarsamy (Kerala)
11	Dhavapandi	32	Alagarsamy
12	Ajis Mohammed	33	Elavarasan
13	Priya	34	Samikannu
14	Vellaiyammal		
<i>Thenakudipatti</i>		<i>Chinnakarpooranpatti</i>	
15	Manikandan	35	Alaguraja (Dubai)
16	Vijay	36	Ravi (Qatar)
17	Jai	37	Samikannu
18	Karuppiyah	38	Chellam
19	Murali	39	Thangam (a) Adaikan (Kuwait)
20	Chinniah	40	Eswari
<i>Kovilpatti</i>		<i>Ivathanpatti</i>	
21	Anandan	41	Maruthupandi
22	Nathiya	42	Dinesh
		43	Ramesh
		44	Thennarasu (Bangalore)
		45	Vignesh



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