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***Samras* in Gujarat Gram Panchayats:  
A Constructive Experiment or Challenge to  
Electoral Democracy?**

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Institute of  
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## Abstract

Gujarat is one of the prosperous states in western India. It was also one among the fewer states that upheld the decentralisation process much before the 73rd constitutional amendment conferring constitutional status to local bodies. This paper focuses on the method of election of peoples' representatives, especially, the sarpanch (president) of the gram panchayat. Apart from direct elections, Gujarat has also opted for the concept of *samras*, initiated and formalised by the state government in 2001. It is a system that encourages unopposed, unanimous, and consensus-based elections. Based on study of four GPs from the two politically distinct regions in Gujarat - central Gujarat, known for its liberal setting and Saurashtra, for its feudal characteristics – this paper tries to unravel the various facets of *samras*, its influence on the delivery system and its implication for the tenet of democracy. Of the four panchayats, two had nominated its sarpanch through *samras*, while the remaining two had its sarpanch elected through direct elections. Primary data was collected through focus group discussions with the people in the respective villages and one-on-one interviews with the elected representatives including sarpanch, *upa* (deputy)-sarpanch and officials at the panchayat and taluka levels with the help of structured schedules. The information thus gathered was triangulated.

**Key words:** Gujarat, panchayat, *samras*, sarpanch, democracy

**JEL codes:** D7, D72

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**Samras in Gujarat Gram Panchayats:  
A Constructive Experiment or Challenge to Electoral Democracy?**

**Madhusudan Bandi**

**1. Introduction**

Democracy as a system of governance has never been alien to the Indian context. There has always been a special place for local administration bodies in India – right from the Indus valley civilization through the British regime to post-independence India. In fact, ancient India was characterised by '*ganapadas*' or village republics governed by local bodies known as 'panchayats'. All public issues including religious services, cultural activities, settlement of civil cases, protection of people, as well as supervision of disaster management services were under the jurisdiction of local panchayats. However, the village administration bodies could not exercise their full autonomy during the British regime due to frequent interferences by the British in the local affairs. The post-independence period was no different with the state governments not allowing the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to flourish because men at the helm of affairs were totally reluctant to let-go their powers to the local bodies even as it amounted to powers to the people at the grassroots level.

The statutory guarantee in 1993 through 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) fundamentally changed the system of local administration 'from a non-representative, autocratic and bureaucratic' one to a representative and responsive system of governance (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2003). Yet, the prerogative to legislate and implement decentralisation lies with the respective state governments. The method adopted to hold elections to the posts of members and executives for PRIs is another important subject. While experts observe that the size of the electorate provides for a good chance to experiment with the direct form of elections, others favour indirect elections. The method of 'unanimous election' has emerged as a third alternative. That it is encouraged and backed by the state is definitely a new development. It is against this background that this paper examines the implications of 'samras' for the very structure of democracy.

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<sup>1</sup>The three-tier structure in Gujarat consists of 26 ZPs, 224 Panchayat Samities or Taluka Panchayats (TPs), and 13,693 GPs spread across 18,584 villages (GoG, 2011).

## 2 Context

Gujarat, one of the prosperous states in the western part of India, happens to be one of the first states to have implemented the Panchayati Raj (PR) system through the Gujarat Panchayat Act (GPA) <sup>1</sup>, which came into effect from April 1, 1963, a couple of years after it became a separate state in 1961 (IRMA, 2008) from the then erstwhile Bombay Presidency or present day Maharashtra. Following the 73rd CAA, GPA 1963 was revoked to make way for GPA, 1993 with effect from April 15, 1994. It is creditworthy that the state had managed to hold on to the PR system for a fairly long time when all other states were reluctant to devolve powers to the people and were even busy cremating decentralisation coinciding with the death of Jawaharlal Nehru (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2003). It is however, a different issue that the present situation does not reflect the past glory of the PR system in the state despite the 73rd CAA. Currently Gujarat is placed seventh among the Indian states according to a recent study (IAC and GV, 2012).

Since this study is focused on the electoral method adopted for electing people's representatives to Gram Panchayats (GP) in Gujarat <sup>2</sup>, it is important to mention that Gujarat is one of the fewer states in India that has opted for direct election to the executives of GPs popularly called 'Sarpanch' or President. Under this system, the sarpanch of a GP is directly elected by the people. The actual process involves two ballot papers – one containing the names of contenders for the sarpanch position and the other containing the names of those contesting for their wards. In both the cases, the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP or FPP) <sup>3</sup> candidate is declared a winner.

Of late, particularly under the regime of the present government, it is increasingly seen that the political administration is promoting unopposed elections not only to the presidency of GPs but also ward membership. The government has introduced it in the form of a 'scheme' with different slabs to award monetary benefits to GPs opting for it. This active promotion has attracted severe criticisms from all quarters on the ground that it throttles the basic principles of democracy. As recently as in June 2012 there was a call to bring in an amendment to the GPA 1993 by the Civil Society (IAC and GV, 2012). The opposition in the state never supported this idea from the beginning. Arjun Modhvadia, President of Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee, believes “they (Bharatiya Janata Party) came out with this concept of buying out villagers in the name of incentives”. He took a further dig during an interaction with the media on December 17, 2011. He said, “thanks to state government's such attitude of false promise and no delivery, many village panchayats were not interested in samras scheme this time” (Desh Gujarat, 2011) However, the government believes that unopposed elections are introduced with good and apolitical intentions.

## 2.1 *What is Samras?*

Samras as a concept was initiated way back in 2001 in Gujarat with many incentives to encourage unopposed/unanimous/consensus method of nomination to the position of executives/sarpanches. This, however, cannot be considered as an altogether new innovation since this practice was not entirely unheard of considering the mention of an executive council of '*panch*' – or five members during the times of '*ganapadas*'. They were selected even by lots or nominated consensually by the village people.

The official justification of the state government with regard to samras is that it helps avoid enmity and plotting among the village people, which the election process invariably creates. The process of samras involves the elders of the village (or a cluster of villages if a GP consists of more than one village) having knowledge and wisdom from different castes or whatever representation they enjoy meeting the prospective candidates to come to an understanding on who would make a better GP sarpanch. Further, the candidates who withdraw 'give up their rights, act for the society, and adopt a noble approach for the higher purpose of the welfare of the people'.

From the government's side, the following incentives are all for grabs: (1) Rs.3 lakh for an all women GP with less than 5000 population; and (2) Rs.5 lakh for a GP with more than 5000 population. Additionally, those opting for samras consecutively for the third time are promised: (a) schools (up to VIII class); (b) solar street lights; (c) pucca roads; and (d) 25 per cent extra funds.

## 2.2 *Methodology*

To understand the method of samras in Gujarat and its influence on the delivery system including its implication for the tenets of democracy, four GPs (two in each district) were selected from the two politically distinct regions in Gujarat - central Gujarat and Saurashtra. If the former presents

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<sup>2</sup>After the 73rd CAA, elections for the three tiers of PR in Gujarat were held in 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2010. The elections were guided by the Gujarat Panchayat Election Rules, 1994.

<sup>3</sup>FPP is an election that is won by a candidate with most votes. The winning candidate does not necessarily receive an absolute majority of all the votes cast.



a liberal setting, the latter is known for its typical feudal characteristics. Among the four GPs, two were purposely selected from those that had nominated their sarpanches through samras while the remaining two were selected from those that had sarpanches elected through a direct election process. Distribution of these GPs thus presents a combination of samras and non-samras sarpanches in each district.

Anand in central Gujarat and Rajkot in Saurashtra were the two regions selected for the study. Anand has the lowest proportion of samras GPs among the other districts in the region. On the other hand, Rajkot accounts for the highest proportion of samras GPs not only in the Saurashtra region but in the entire state. The four GPs studied here may not wholly represent the state with 18,584 GPs, but are certainly expected to provide an indication and understanding of what is happening on the ground with respect to the affairs of panchayats, particularly samras in the state. All the four GPs were constituted in December, 2011.

The basic sources through which primary data was obtained for the study include focus group discussions (FGDs) with the common people in the respective villages and one-on-one interviews with the elected representatives including sarpanches, upa-sarpanches and the officials at the GP and *taluka* levels with the help of structured schedules. The field survey was carried out in the month of June, 2012.

### **3. Influence of Samras as a Concept on the Functioning of Panchayats**

#### **3.1 Election Method: Respondent's Preference**

With regard to a very fundamental question on the method to elect a sarpanch, a majority of the respondents including the elected executive members, ordinary members, officials and common people express their preference for direct elections. Even the GP members are found to be against the idea of indirect elections, despite the fact that it would make them more powerful as king-makers within such an arrangement. A common reasoning has been that the GP members would blackmail and destabilise the tenure of sarpanch by virtue of being in the decisive position of 'king makers'. Besides, they opine that this method could give rise to horse-trading, which in turn might create pressures on the members themselves all the time in terms of switching sides and that in this melee of confusion, the developmental work would suffer.

However, the general opinion is found divided among the respondents when it comes to choosing between direct elections and samras. Among the two samras GPs, a majority of the ordinary GP members and common people in Anand district do not appear happy with samras. The reason could be the dominance of one family over the GP. The socio-political situation here could be likened to a feudal set-up. Moreover, except on one occasion, when the sarpanch's seat was reserved for a Scheduled Caste (SC) candidate (this person was said to be the yes-man of the family), this GP has always had the sarpanch from this family in succession ever since the introduction of GP elections in the state. The present GP also has a sarpanch and upa-sarpanch from this family. Incidentally, it was this family that had decided to make their GP all-women to avail of the benefits from the government under all-women samras quota. It is no secret that all the women were dummies for their male relatives (in most cases husbands or sons). Interestingly, many of the common people of this village, while wanting to strictly remain anonymous expressed (many of them spoke when the researcher met them again in another village) their opinion against samras, particularly after experiencing the high-handedness of one family in the constituency. They view that people should be given their basic democratic right to express themselves freely through a secret ballot. They argue that the people cannot but support the samras proposal made by the dominant families like the one in their village, especially, when the government is giving incentives. People know well that if anybody raises their voice against them, he and his family would not only be branded traitors for hampering the chances of getting funds to their GP, but also stand to lose economically and socially in terms of getting ostracised in the village. Curiously, a young *talati* (village secretary – a government official) posted recently at this GP also thinks that the GPs would be better-off if samras was done away with for good. Neither does he specify any particular reason nor does he take a decisive stance. It appears that he is in agreement with the views expressed by the people. His reluctance to come out in the open against anybody seems understandable.

In the second GP in Rajkot, an overwhelming majority of the respondents including sarpanch, upa-sarpanch and other GP members along with the common people and the talati express that samras is a good concept. Interestingly, this GP has got its sarpanch through elections, not samras. They blame the opposition group for holding elections and thus damaging the chances of getting government incentives that would have made their panchayat richer by about 3 lakh rupees. On probing further with the other members from the opposition camp and checking the GP records, it is found that the victory margin mustered by the sarpanch was less than 80

votes out of a total of about 1300 votes. This shows that the election was bitterly contested and the victory was not definitely a cake walk for the sarpanch. This not only proves the claims of the winning candidate that the entire GP was with him is not 100 per cent true, but also that when people are given a choice to select someone through a secret ballot they will express their wish with freedom and without fear. If it were to be samras they remain silent watching and following the movements of the dominant decision makers in the panchayat.

The Taluka Development Officer (TDO) covering the jurisdiction of Anand GP expresses his preference against the concept of samras. His argument is that while voting through a secret ballot is fundamental to democracy, why it should be tampered with at all. He further observes that if a person is popular enough to get elected unanimously, it should not be difficult for him to get elected hands down even if elections were to be held. He does not see much substance in the argument that non-conducting of elections saves a lot of money to the government exchequer. According to him, the expenses incurred for holding elections are nothing when compared to upholding democratic tenets. He believes that the state authority should be ready to address minor skirmishes that arise during elections by way of creating fearless atmosphere.

The case of Rajkot presents a contrasting picture of a samras village as compared to that of Anand. Under this GP people all along have willingly preferred samras. Considering that this panchayat is a rehabilitated one (their original village got submerged under the dam), there seems to exist a great sense of comradeship among its people. The elected GP members and common people appear to be quite happy with the samras concept. However, a couple of general members of the GP who belong to the dominant Patel (farming) caste seem a little unhappy for the reason that their constituency has been reserved for other backward classes (OBC), even though they consider the person occupying the position to be very good, competent and friendly. Talati, on the other side, finds samras an ideal concept. According to him, it indeed reduces administrative problems, especially, during elections and also while taking decisions on developmental activities. He compares samras GP with those to which elections have been held. He gives an account of his own experience and also of his colleagues in this regard. According to him, day to day differences may arise between the sarpanch and the opposition under an elected GP. This he thinks is done by the opposition under one pretext or the other just to hold back the development initiatives of the GP so that the

least credit goes to the sarpanch and his group. Thus, he claims that unnecessary time is wasted in the process besides the panchayat getting often paralysed. He likens this to the stalling of parliament sessions in Delhi. This, he believes, ultimately harms the interests of the people.

The GP in Rajkot where elections have been held for choosing their sarpanch, the opinion is found equally divided among the GP members and the common people on samras. While some see wisdom in opting for samras to not only save money to the government exchequer, but also to gain monetary incentives for the betterment of their own panchayat, those opposed to this idea contend as to why should a few people impose somebody on them when there is a rightful option to exercise their wish through secret voting. According to teacher among the common people under either system leaders are not going to do any good to the society or people. He points to the encroachments made on the very panchayat land by some of the villagers with active connivance of some of the former and present panchayat members. What is the guarantee that these members would use the government's money in the interests of the general people?<sup>4</sup> He observes that elections are better than samras as one can express one's opinion freely, irrespective of who wins. At least one can have the satisfaction of venting out one's anger by not voting for someone he/she thinks is not fit for the post. Not any different from elections held to the GP in Anand district, the sarpanch of this GP also managed to win with less than 200 votes out of a total of about 1400 votes. While analysing elections in a democratic set-up, this margin looks handsome. But, in the context of unanimous elections, 100 per cent expression of support from the eligible voters is implied.

The TDO of the taluka where this GP falls, however, is completely in favour of samras. He feels that samras presents a cordial atmosphere leading to fewer arguments in the GP. Thus, the programmes or schemes could be implemented easily and speedily. Coincidentally, in his taluka, 52 per cent (44 out of 85) of the GPs have samras sarpanches. The reason for talatis and TDOs to project samras as a novel concept is twofold: one, as government employees, they do not want to be seen as against the policy of the government and two, they presume that samras GPs are not able to

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<sup>4</sup>The incentives received by the 2 samras GPs amount to Rs. 312,500 each. Both the GPs received this amount directly to their GP bank accounts from the government within 2 months after the election results in the state. Both these GPs plan to utilize these funds to get matching grants from either the government or Non-government organisations for the purpose of village development.

experiment with samras in their respective GPs overlook the undercurrent of rebellion looming within such samras panchayats. free of conflicts that help them carry out their duties smoothly compared to GPs to which elections are held. The mindset of these officials and also those people who

### **3.2 *Accessibility to Sarpanch***

With respect to their views regarding accessibility to sarpanches, our discussions with the respondents of the elected GPs and samras GPs reveal that they vary across all the four GPs. The respondents including GP members, common people and talati report difficulties in gaining access to the sarpanch in the all-women samras panchayat in Anand district. The reason is attributed to the dominant attitude of the family, which has been at the helm of panchayat affairs since decades in the area. In respect of the elected GPs in Anand, talatis and a majority of the GP members report that they have no problems in accessing their sarpanches. However, this does hold good for a couple of GP members and quite a number of people in the GP because they are seen as opponents. Even the two elected members are found to have skipped the GP meetings even though they sign the required minutes and other registers when they are sent to their homes.

In Rajkot district, the members of the samras GP are found extremely happy with their panchayat sarpanch as he is ever available to the members and officials alike. In fact, the talati cites this GP as a case in point for the samras concept. However, another GP in the same district with its sarpanch elected directly presents a completely contrasting picture. The discord between the cross sections of people appears very evident with some of the GP members being unhappy with the attitude of the sarpanch. The talati sees no reason to worry on this count. The situation prevailing under this GP clearly presents a picture of groupism with clear overtones of caste differences.

### **3.3. *Decision-making***

People's active participation and their role in the decision-making are very important in a democratic set up. Particularly at the GP level, where there is a provision for Gram Sabhas (GS), it provides ample opportunities to the people to participate in their own village affairs. Our discussions with the

respondents in three of the four GPs studied reveal that people's involvement is at its peak only when the GPs are newly constituted or in their infancy. This tendency slowly dwindles over time most often due to the non-fulfillment of promises made before elections. Besides, many of the opposition members and those belonging to the weaker sections choose not to attend because they find themselves ignored. Further, the signatures of the GP members (not belonging to the group of the sarpanch) are taken from their homes just to fulfill the formalities. Even these members do not prefer, most of the times to attend the meetings either at the GP or GS.

However, one exception is samras GP in Rajkot. Here, the respondents do participate regularly in the GSs on all important issues. Everyone agreed that panchayat business is carried out in a democratic manner and that the GP leadership follows the decisions taken in the GS. This, they claim, has been the tradition of this GP. The talati finds working with this GP relatively relaxed with no unnecessary hassles, whereas talatis of the other three GPs have to trade and balance many things with the elected members and the common people to keep the proceedings under check.

### **3.4 *Distribution of Resources and Allocation of Government Schemes***

Most of the respondents including GP members from the samras GP in Anand appear ignorant of most of the government schemes. According to them, the family of the sarpanch takes all decisions pertaining to the implementation of schemes as also the identification of beneficiaries coming under the panchayat. Although they acknowledge the lack of transparency in respect of these issues, they seem to be fairly happy with the development activities being carried out in the GP under the supervision of the sarpanch's family. Even the talati has no problems since he has not come across any complaints from people in this regard. In contrast, the sarpanch elected by people at the other GP in this district has already earned a dubious name for himself in the wake of an approach road laid under his contractorship with people suspecting a mismatch between the amount sanctioned and the actual expenditure incurred. However, a majority of the GP members and common people alike are convinced that the allocation of schemes and the identification of beneficiaries is decided in the GS. The present talati sounds positive about the sarpanch's performance in this regard.

The elected sarpanch of Rajkot GP does not seem to enjoy the confidence of all people. Especially, the SC and OBC members of the GP seem upset over the issue of overlooking them and their interests with respect to the distribution of resources and schemes of the central and state governments. The sarpanch is accused of favouring his own supporters. In fact, the GS here seems as good as nonexistent. With discontent running so high, the common people do not see any reason to attend GSs. The talati explains that he does try to fulfill his responsibilities by taking care whether the government schemes are reaching out to the target groups and that he does not allow politics to hinder his work. However, the samras GP in this district presents a rosy picture of the distribution of resources and schemes justifiably to the people by prioritizing the needy first. The beneficiaries here are duly identified in the GS held for such specific schemes. Right from the elected representatives to the common people coming under this GP hold a similar opinion. The talati too has a high opinion about the GP in this aspect.

#### **4. Determinants of Panchayat Elections**

##### **4.1 Caste Factor**

The respondents from cross-sections across the four GPs studied believe that caste factor indeed plays an important role in every aspect of panchayat decisions with no exceptions. However, they acknowledge the fact that the degree and dynamics could vary depending on the social composition of a particular village.

On being asked to give their specific impressions on the role of caste in the election of GP sarpanch and its influence on his/her decision-making, the members of samras GP in Anand observe that they can not make any comparison because barring one term (when the post was reserved for SC) the members of the present sarpanch's family have dominated this GP. This family belongs to a dominant *Kshatriya* (warrior) community and nobody questions the authority of this dominant family. Hence, the decisions are always unilaterally taken by this family. The best example to gauge this is the manner of constitution of the standing committee with the husband of the sarpanch simply reading out the names of the members he wanted, directing who it should be headed by, followed by the endorsement of the same by other members. As for the other GP in this district, the sarpanch belongs to the SC community (reserved seat). The

SC and OBCs here appear assertive, which is duly reflected by the attitude of the voters. In brief, the caste impact can be taken as not adverse as confirmed by the talati. To appoint the standing committee, a due democratic process was followed with the sarpanch and secretary of the GP consulting other elected members and also members of SC households besides the elders in the village before constituting it.

Coming to Rajkot district, the GP with elected sarpanch consists of a heterogeneous society with a large number of castes such as Patels, different groups of OBCs, and SCs. According to the GP members including the elected executives and common people, the discrimination on the basis of caste is rampant not only in the GP but also panchayat affairs. The aggrieved sections, most often, are the people belonging to the SC community. When asked to explain the difficulties faced by them particularly in discharging their duties in the panchayat, only one SC member expresses that, it is the upper caste members who indeed discriminate against him and that they do not involve him in any kind of decision making, but take his signature on resolutions and attendance sheets of meetings and also the documents he is not even aware of. Regarding the constitution of the standing committee, common people and many of the GP members irrespective of their caste are not aware of what this committee is all about. However, it is constituted with members from the SCs on the advice of talati. The atmosphere in the samras GP in this district seems quite contrasting because the people belonging to different castes live harmoniously. This patel dominated GP has a sarpanch belonging to OBC. Asked about the role of caste, the GP members sound pleased with the situation in that the caste factor has never been an issue here as the patels and OBCs live in total harmony (this GP has no SC households). The upa-sarpanch, however, acknowledged that, if government had not reserved this seat for OBC, he would have forwarded his name for consideration to the post of sarpanch. Personal ambition, apart, he has no ill-will against his sarpanch. Rather, he is proud that the sarpanch is his best friend doing a good job. Since all the decisions are collectively taken, nobody suspects any sort of caste-laden decisions. Common people, talati and even the sarpanch share a similar view. The president's views are important because he belongs to OBC, but he has never experienced hurdles anytime in discharging his duties. This GP presents itself as a clear example of how caste or even the method of election can have no influence on the proper functioning of GPs when the village atmosphere is above all these considerations. Since this GP has no SC households, there is no standing committee as such.



## 4.2 *Party Affiliations / Partisanship and Money Power*

As far as party affiliation or partisanship is concerned, all the respondents across the four GPs from both the districts admit that this instinct does exist because they vote for legislative assemblies and parliament on the party lines and that each of them is affiliated to one or the other political party. According to them, even when the GP elections are party-less contests, the imprints of party affiliations do show-up during elections. Since samras GP in Anand district is completely dominated by the sarpanch's family, it is natural that the whims and fancies of it prevails in the end. It is obvious that irrespective of party affiliations or partisanship, it is they who decide everything. In the other GP with an elected sarpanch, the party affiliations are very much visible not only during elections but also while taking decisions in the GP. It is evident from the views of the common people and a couple of GP members opposed to the sarpanch that he indeed adopts partisan approach while taking decisions. The sarpanch denies vehemently all the allegations against him. He and his supporters claim that anyone having grievances can raise them in the GS or GP meetings. They further claim that all ill-feelings surfacing during elections are forgotten once the elections are over and that people move back to normal relations because they have to stay together in the same village.

The public, in opposition, could only say that though an avenue like GS is available for them to demand justice, they find it dominated by the people supporting the sarpanch. A similar situation is found prevailing in the GP in Rajkot with an elected sarpanch. But, there a majority of the common people appears displeased and discontent with the sarpanch mainly for the way he shows favoritism to his own people. The samras GP in this district appears ideal in this respect. Here, the GP members including those elected to the executive posts and also talati present a procedure as to how the choice of candidates is made by the learned and elders in a village assembly (specifically called for this) represented by all sections from and all walks of life. In the post election phase also this body of elders keeps close vigil on the decisions of the sarpanch to avert any possibility of partisanship.

The possible outside influence from the parliamentarians or legislators either during the elections or thereafter on the decision making is insignificant at their level as per the opinions expressed by the GP members, common people and also the talatis coming under these GPs. In

the two samras GPs in Anand and Rajkot, the tendency to go for samras was very much present among the people even before the announcement of incentives by the government. The elected sarpanch of the GP in Rajkot though expresses his resentment that an important office holder of the party in power in the district tried to convince him into influencing people coming under the GP with lucrative offers to opt for samras instead of elections. As claimed by this sarpanch, he single-handedly opposed the offer and insisted on fighting the election resulting in his victory.

It would put many candidates to a complex Situation in the towns or cities contesting elections to the legislative assemblies if the amount quoted by the elected sarpanch of the GP in Anand district is to be believed. Even the samras GP sarpanch's family admits to shelling out lakhs of rupees to please the people by feeding them for days before the nominations ended.

## **5. Theoretical Connotations**

Discussing samras in the context of theory would help one understand how far the concept has been able to influence the basic tenets of democracy as also the political life of the state.

Democracies now in welfare times of the modern era, are necessarily indirect or representative 'liberal democracies'. As for Indian democracy there remains no doubt that it indeed falls under this category. It has all the characteristics of a liberal democracy as defined by Alan R Ball (1994). These crucial tenets are: (i) the existence of more than one party competing for political power through a secret-ballot with accepted norms of a universal franchise, besides providing freedom on matters relating to religion, speech and other civil liberties; and (ii) separation of powers to control the executive. If we come back to the samras experience, it becomes evident that the present trend completely dislodges the basic tenets of democracy in terms of discouraging individuals from contesting elections. It desecrates not only the maintenance of secrecy, but also destabilises the universal franchise altogether. This is done systematically in the first instance itself when the village elders meet in public to identify individuals to be made sarpanches unopposed. In reality, these village elders belong to a particular dominant caste of a given GP. The study reveals the dominant role of the caste and wealth factor in the functioning of both the samras GPs. The prevailing caste hierarchy dominates over the weaker sections, who tend to remain silent. This automatically throttles

the ambitions of the backward sections of people in terms of making it to the top posts in the GPs despite their numerical strength which could go a long way in their favour if fair elections are held. Not holding elections in itself amounts to complete rejection of the universal franchise concept.

The proponents of samras want democrats to believe that this is an effective solution to what elections have no answer to. Their contention is that while at least 49 per cent of the electorate go unrepresented under the election process, samras provides an opportunity for the entire 100 per cent to decide on their candidates. However, our study has enough evidence to show as to how samras is achieved through coercion of a different kind by the influential people at the panchayats. Further, samras as a system acts as political deprivation of the masses (voters) to an intolerance level after a point. It is because samras always leaves a doubt about the fairness of elections (rather nominations) as is proved in the elections held to GPs where the difference between the winning and losing candidates is in no way, overwhelming which should have been the case, going by the claims of possible advantages of samras GPs.

## **6. Conclusion**

The debate over an ideal method of elections has always been alive among the students of democracy. There are innumerable modes available the world over, yet none provides an effective solution to the problems associated with a practicing democracy. Perhaps the experimentation with samras in Gujarat only adds to the debate because, the claims of 'erasing enmity and plotting among the villagers' through samras appear to have no concrete evidence. Rather, in respect of both the contexts, the social atmosphere is getting disturbed. If samras GP is presenting an unhappy and dejected set of voters for having denied them the opportunity to test their will through secret-ballot, the losing candidate and his/her supporters in the election held GP had to bear a stigma of being traitors of their GP for denying the possible government incentives. And this tendency is nothing less than a streak of fascism. For a true socialist and democrat, it is not always the development criteria that determine the lives of the people, but the political right and aspirations of the suppressed groups for generations by way of asserting themselves.

In fact, unopposed silence among the people in one of the samras GPs spoke volumes about the underlying suppression. Their situation is such that they are dependent on a single family bearing feudalistic tendencies.

Hence, this family could manage samras for its GP and sarpanch-ship to its family members. Demanding elections would have certainly necessitated elections for the sarpanch-ship in their GP, though the fate of those not falling in line would have been miserable.

Even in the absence of government encouragement through incentives, samras kind of initiative by the people on their own also should not be entertained particularly in a dynamic society like India because there is every chance of suppression of unheard voice further under the weight of the elites in the rural context. It creates hurdles to the emergence of new leadership particularly from the underprivileged sections who are often the voiceless lots despite their numerical strength.

Further, those who argue and believe that one cannot stand against the might of the elites proposing samras in the GP fearing a definite defeat even on contesting should remember that surrendering to the whims of the powerful only strengthens the authoritarian attitude in the society. Elections effectively helps democracy take roots even if the liberal and positive results may show up later gradually.

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