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Youth and Panchayat

A synergy to promote participation



PREFACE

India is a young nation, with a fledgling democracy. A major proportion of India's population is made up of its youth, who have a significant role to play in the unfolding of the country's democracy. Current trends, however, indicate that most of our youth are so involved with personal and professional pursuits that they have moved away from the collective developmental goal of the nation. Therefore, the potential of the youth in contributing to the progress of the overall community is gradually drying up. On another note, the Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI) system, which is a hallmark of self-reliance and decentralised governance at the grassroots, is also straying from its mission. In a drive to win elections and get popular support, the PRIs are focusing more on infrastructural growth and less on social development. The PRIs are also disassociating themselves from the community's youth. Consequently, in a state like Haryana, where the social and human development index is very weak, popular participation and deep inclination on the part of PRIs to address social challenges in the state are urgently required.

PRIA Haryana recognised that the key to improving the social scenario in the state lies in promoting a synergy between the voluntary action of the Youth Clubs and the institutional mechanism of the Gram Panchayats. Thus, these two actors will mutually reinforce each other to foster a higher pace of development in the villages. This step will also ensure youth participation in community development programmes, while helping the Youth Clubs to establish themselves as a partner in the process of development. The partnership will also help in addressing the emerging needs of the community's youth.

This booklet presents the initiatives and achievements of PRIA Haryana in accomplishing a synergy between the PRIs and the youth. Among a host of initiatives by PRIA Haryana toward the mentioned cause, the youth leaders' intense participation in the Pre-Election Voters' Awareness Campaign (PEVAC) in Haryana to make social issues an agenda for *panchayat* elections demonstrated the true potential of the youth in community mobilisation. Consequently, Sanjha Kadam (shared initiative) was born, which is a forum of CSOs on reforming local self-governance in the state. Another accomplishment of the process was a formal association with the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sanghathan (NYKS). This association between NYKS and Sanjha Kadam facilitated a wide outreach for the campaign and a revival of NYKS in the social development of the state. Thus, PEVAC 2004-05 was a ground-breaking attempt to connect youth with local self-governance, when many young women and men also became motivated to contest elections. As a follow up, the youth were also engaged in the Panchayati Raj Jagrukta Abhiyaan (PRAJA), which strengthened their capacities. There was, moreover, a focused intervention in facilitating PRIs to deliver on the state's adverse Sex Ratio in association with the Youth Clubs. This partnership between the youth and PRIs has built and developed an effective interface with government agencies, ensuring that the Government demonstrates sensitivity to the special needs of the youth and their elected representatives.

As a catalyst for social transformation and good governance, PRIA Haryana seeks to share the successes and the learnings from engaging youth with PRIs. The same is being presented as a prototype that can be replicated and expanded in other regions of the country. It is important to provide a common platform to the youth and the

PRIs, as their effective partnership will ascertain an effective functioning of PRIs in future. It will also guarantee that issues of social importance become an integral part of a PRI's agenda. Last but not the least, this synergy will guarantee that youth at the grassroots level do not turn away from the process of democracy and governance as their participation is indispensable for our democracy.

My sincere thanks to all those youth leaders, and PRI elected representatives who exhibited keen interest and commitment to accept this challenge. I am grateful to Dr. Rajesh Tandon, President, PRIA, for his valuable inputs and insights in conceptualising and supporting this initiative. A special word of gratitude to Shri O.P. Kumar, Reid. Programme Director, Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangthan (NYKS) who volunteered his services and support to implement this project. My thanks to all the officials of NYKS whose continuous support and participation made it possible to involve youth on such a large scale. I am also thankful to my colleagues, Krishan Tyagi, Nitin Pandey, Pawan Sheokand and Dhan Singh, who played a significant role in organising and co-ordinating this innovative and challenging initiative.

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Part I: The Premise

An overview

The youth of India represents the myriad colours of the nation. They are vibrant with hope, effervescent with aspirations and radiant in spirit. India's youth, in the age group of 15-35 years, represents one-third of the country's population. India has the highest number of young persons in the world. It is estimated that the number of people in the age group of 13-35 years will be 510 million by 2016. Thus, the youth will have a significant role to play in the development of the nation.

India's youth population is not only huge, but also vigorous and active, as well as open and responsive to new ideas and change. In his address to the nation in January 2005, President Abul Kalam Azad declared that it is the purposeful hard work and sweat of the youth that will transform India into a powerful nation. Therefore, for true nation building it is crucial to involve the youth in the process of strengthening participatory democracy and development.

India is a young nation, with a democracy that is still unfolding. The youth have a significant role to play in ensuring India's growth. As Shashi Tharoor has said in his book, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*, "It is the youth of India (the age group with highest literacy level of 77%) who will help to sustain an India open to the contention of ideas and interests within it, unafraid of the prowess or the products of the outside world, wedded to the pluralism that is India's greatest strength and determined to liberate and fulfill the creative energies of its people. Such an India can make the twenty-first century her own." Thus, in a developing country like India, which is undergoing continuous change, youth are our invaluable assets.

The question that emerges, however, is whether the youth is substantially involved in strengthening the nation's democracy, and more importantly, whether they are actively participating in the decision making process of the country. The response is not very optimistic as a large proportion of the youth remain unaware of the various facets of democracy. In a drive to meet their academic and career objectives and personal commitments, youngsters are moving away from the socio-political debate of the 'nation'. Furthermore, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, apathy and ignorance are tremendous challenges in integrating youth from the low socio-economic strata. Moreover, rural youth groups are left out of the process of democracy.

It is, therefore, imperative to provide increasing opportunities to India's youth to enable them to develop their personalities as well as to make them economically productive and socially useful. It is equally important to motivate them to develop their perspective about the Indian democracy and to actively engage themselves with its functioning.

The scope

Mahatma Gandhi had stated that India is a nation of villages, and it is important to make the villages self-reliant for a more prosperous India. The Panchayati Raj was visualised as a potent institution to promote people-centred development as well as to establish democracy at the grassroots level. Unfortunately, the programmes and policies governing the institution have rendered the PRIs as mere implementing agencies rather than institutions of self-governance. In Haryana, PRIs in general have restricted their roles and responsibilities to the construction of roads, buildings, ponds, etc. They have not been able to visualise their role in addressing social problems like sex-selective abortion, dowry, domestic violence, girl child education, sanitation, health, etc. Incidentally, despite being one of the most progressive states in terms of economic development, Haryana lags much behind many others in terms of social development indicators.

The level of participation among the rural mass has been quite low in PRIs, making the system empty of democratic content. There is a need to nurture the role of rural youth in the democratic process of the country. For progress at the grassroots, it is crucial that the rural youth are informed enough and have the opportunity to voice their opinion and participate in village-level decision making for a better future for themselves and their communities.

Recognising the potential of this institution of direct democracy, PRIA has been working towards increased mobilisation and participation of women and youth in Gram Sabha meetings. PRIA's experience in Haryana has shown that enhanced community ownership and participation in conducting Gram Sabha meetings have helped place women's issues and other social issues in focus for the first time. It has also shown that the participation of all groups in a Gram Sabha result in sustainable and effective development of villages. There have been cases, which show that the empowerment of Gram Sabhas has led to effective development campaigns such as pulse polio, safe drinking water, health and education.

It is in this context that PRIA in Haryana promoted the involvement of rural youth in the democratic process by integrating them with the local governance system, or the PRIs, in Haryana. This collective endeavour envisages a desirable change at the grassroots level on the issue of sex-selective abortion. This report presents the initiatives of PRIA in promoting youth participation in rural Haryana by enabling them to synergise with the PRI system for a healthy exchange of ideas and information for the achievement of development goals. The report also poses issues that need to be tackled, while promoting engagement between youth and the *panchayats*. Finally, some points for reflections have also been presented as possible ways of moving forward.

Part II: A Dissection

Youth mobilisation: a look at policies and programmes

Mahatma Gandhi emphasised the need for the involvement of people in every aspect of governance. He had a very clear understanding of the Indian masses having the potential to independently solve their own problems. Gandhi understood the dynamics of social change that could be executed only through youth involvement, which he tried successfully during the Independence Movement of India.

To extract participation and involvement from the youth and to inform and orient them about their rights and entitlements, Youth Clubs were formed in India. It was realised that since the youth know the strengths and challenges of their areas, have abundant energy, and work with a voluntary spirit for the development of their own community; they will be a potent force to awaken the country. Through the Youth Clubs, youth were expected to identify problems, suggest alternatives, formulate action plans and execute them, mostly on a voluntary basis.

Systematic efforts have been made since independence to promote the participation of youth in rural development. The Community Development programme (1952) promoted Youth Clubs and mahila mandals as organised voluntary effort at the community-level to ensure overall development of villages. These organisations not only made significant contributions to village development, but also undertook awareness campaigns on social issues such as health, education and eradication of social evils.

In 1972, a nationwide scheme to involve non-student rural youth in the process of rural development and popularisation of nationally accepted objectives such as self-reliance, socialism, secularism, democracy, national integration and development of scientific temper was launched. To achieve the aforesaid objectives, district youth centres called Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS) were established. The strategy behind NYKS was to generate awareness, organise and mobilise rural youth for rural development with emphasis on value, vision and voluntary action. Ever since, NYKS has been the largest forum of grassroots organisation in the country with a network of 0.2 million village youth organisations, popularly known as Youth Clubs/Mahila Mandals, 1,023 Rural Sports Clubs (RSCs), 2,551 Youth Development Centres (YDCs) and 164 Rural Information Technology Youth Development Centres (RITYDC).

The organisations of youth and women were facilitated by NYKS, but created by the people themselves to meet their own local needs and solve their own socio-economic problems. These non-official organisations came into being spontaneously, voluntarily and without any external compulsions or control. They have their own set of regulations, raise their own funds and manage their affairs by themselves. They may or may not receive financial or other assistance from the Government. They are affiliated to the NYKS and receive guidance and training from them for performing their daily tasks.



Figure 1: A workshop organised by PRIA with NYKS in progress

The National Youth Policy, 2003, provides an idea about the commitment of the National Government for the welfare and development of India's youth. It covers all youth in the age group of 13 to 35 years. The groups are further subdivided into two broad sub-groups for 13-19 years and 20-35 years. Youth from the first group, which forms a major part of adolescent years, have been recognised as a separate

constituency. The thrust of the policy centres on "youth empowerment" in different spheres of national life.

The National Youth Policy affirms the national commitment for composite and all-round development of youth and seeks to establish an all India perspective to fulfil their legitimate aspirations and empower them to successfully accomplish the challenging tasks of national reconstruction and social change. In this regard, the policy recognises four thrust areas, viz., youth empowerment, gender justice, intersectoral approach and information and research network. It also highlights the following eight key sectors of youth development:

- i. Education
- ii. Training and empowerment
- iii. Health
- iv. Environment
- v. Sports and recreation
- vi. Art and culture
- vii. Science and technology
- viii. Civics and citizenship

The policy further recognises that youth development is a multi-faceted concept. The policy underscores the necessity for all relevant agencies, including PRIs to devise their plans and programme bearing youth development in mind. The policy advocates a multi-dimensional and integrated approach, with State agencies striving to accelerate the formulation and implementation of programmes.

The policy also envisages that all Ministries and Departments of the Central and State Governments, particularly in the social sector, will strive to make identifiable allocations in their budget for youth development programmes.

The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports is the nodal Ministry to oversee the implementation of the provisions of the policy and all programmes and schemes concerning youth development in the nation.

Dimensions of the Youth Programme

The following are the key aspects of the youth programme of the Government of India, including the scheme for NYKS:

- Preparation of youth for life and work, including upgradation of their functional capabilities
- Participation of youth in national development efforts
- Viewing and deploying youth as catalysts of social change
- Fostering the emotional involvement of youth in the promotion of the spirit of national identity and the protection of national integrity

Youth mobilisation in Haryana

Haryana is one of the most prosperous states in India, with an area of 44,212 sq. km. and a total population of 21.08 million. There are 20 districts, 119 blocks and 706 villages in Haryana. Keeping in view the economic development of the state, its performance in literacy, health, sanitation and other aspects of social and human development has not been as impressive. Haryana's poor sex ratio (861 per 1,000 males), low literacy rate (56 per cent) and high infant mortality rate (102) are causes for concern. Social evils like sex-selective abortion, dowry, violence and discrimination against women reveal a dark picture of the status of women in the state.

It is interesting to note that Haryana does not have a separate policy for its youth. Its schemes and programmes are, however, to some extent guided by the National Youth Policy. Nonetheless, Haryana is the only state in India, which has a registered (under the Societies Registration Act, 1860) Youth Club in all the Gram Panchayats. As per official records, the membership of these approximately 7,000 Youth Clubs is 2.8 lakh. However, these clubs face the following major challenges:

- To demonstrate their identity and relevance in the 'development' context
- To build and enhance their capacity to play an active role in effective implementation of development programmes and schemes in coordination with Gram Panchayats
- To orient and restructure (wherever required) Youth Clubs to ensure representation of youth from all communities, particularly the weaker sections
- To ensure active participation of female youth, either by ensuring their appropriate representation in existing youth clubs, or by forming clubs exclusively for female youth
- Most youth club members are either unemployed or semi employed. Youth clubs have been able to undertake income generating activities either at the individual level or on a co-operative basis to address the problem of gainful employment
- Organisation of youth and women are only at the grassroots level. There is a need to organise them at the block, district, state and national levels so that they can play important roles and participate effectively in decision making at state and national levels
- There is either scarcity or lack of funds in youth clubs. Activities are based on contributions like donations and fund collection.

The above challenges hinder the growth of youth clubs and their initiatives to activate the youth as change makers for community development.

Panchayati Raj in Haryana

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993, was a landmark decision to promote PRIs as institutions of local self-governance. The Act visualised PRIs as constitutional bodies to ensure economic development and social justice. At present, there are around three million elected members of PRIs in India, representing approximately 250,000 village level panchayats, 6,000 block-level panchayats and 550 district-level panchayats. As institutions of local governance, PRIs are expected to create their own development plan and generate resources to ensure their effective implementation.

The main objective of enacting the 73rd Constitution Amendment was to improve the participation of people in the development process. The principle of participation means that every citizen should feel equally responsible for recognising problems in her or his community and be allowed and enabled to bring them to the attention of the local bodies. In addition, a citizen should be entitled, according to her/his capacity, to contribute in solving them.

There are some important features of the Constitution Amendments like adequate representation of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women, a fixed tenure of five years, regular elections, preparation and implementation of plans for economic development and social justice that are helpful in strengthening the Panchayati Raj system.

The history of the Panchayati Raj system in Haryana has not been very encouraging. In the beginning, the state had introduced PRI with three tiers, the Gram Panchayat, the Panchayat Samiti and the Zila Parishad. In 1973, however, the State Government amended the State RR Act and dispersed with Zila Parishads and retained two tiers, the Gram Panchayat and the Panchayat Samiti. After the Constitutional Amendment, the state enacted the Haryana Panchayat Raj Act, 1994, and accordingly held elections for PRIs in 1994, 2000 and 2005.

Details of Elected Representatives of PRIs in Haryana (2005)

Panch	:	60,537
Sarpanch	:	6,194
Panchayat Samiti Member	:	2,833
Zila Parishad Member	:	384

PRIs in Haryana face the following constraints and challenges that need to be addressed to achieve the real outcome of governance at the grassroots level:

- At present, the PRIs primarily work as implementing agency of Government schemes and programmes. They need to function as institutions of local governance
- Passivity of Gram Sabhas creates a negative impact on the PRIs. Thus, there is a need to ensure effective participation of people through Gram Sabha and standing/sub-committees. This entails making Gram Sabha and standing/sub-committees vibrant bodies
- Lack of sustainable and self-reliant financial resources make the Gram Panchayats dependent on aids provided by Government agencies. The State Government has not 'devolved' adequate funds and functionaries to PRIs
- Low level of participation by women and low caste/indigenous groups limits participation. Special steps needed to promote participation of women, Dalits

and indigenous communities in formulating and implementing schemes and programmes for the development of a village

- Attitude of Government officials toward PRIs dampens the spirit of their members. There is a need to build and develop an interface with Government agencies as 'partners'. Government officials will also have to be sensitised to reciprocate this relationship in partnership mode rather than treating Panchayats as their implementing agencies
- Low-skilled organisation and management system slows down sound impact and monitoring of activities. A need exists, therefore, to develop a participatory monitoring and evaluation mechanism to support effective functioning of GPs
- Low awareness among masses about PRI restricts the scope of the institution
- People are losing faith and do not take interest in matters of PRIs, because of increasing local politics and divisions in the rural community

The following issues require urgent attention, if the local self-government system (*panchayats*) is to become a meaningful instrument of democratic governance in keeping with the letter and spirit of the Constitution:

- Devolution of powers
- Control of PRIs over the bureaucracy
- Effective participation of weaker socio-economic sections and women in daily affairs of panchayats
- Adequate financial resources
- Synergy with other people's institutions and NGOs
- Proper functioning and exercising of powers provided to Gram Sabha by legislation

Need for Synergy between Youth Clubs and PRIs

To revive the Youth Clubs and increase youth participation in local governance, an interface between Youth Clubs and Gram Panchayats should be promoted. The interface would be a two-way channel to promote involvement of youth in the decision making process as well as to advance knowledge about the PRI among community members. The Programme Evaluation Organisation of the Planning Commission, in a study of conducted by NYKS in 1990, found that, "The Youth Clubs working in the village create awareness among village youth and prove to be the backbone of panchayats who find their association a must for village development programmes."

Below are a few arguments to establish that an interface between Youth Clubs and Gram Panchayats could be key to enhance democracy at the grassroots and evoke greater participation from the youth:

- Amid the challenges faced by Youth Clubs and Gram Panchayats, it is crucial that voluntary action manifested through the Youth Clubs and institutional mechanisms demonstrated by Gram Panchayats mutually reinforce each other to foster development in villages. This will ensure quality participation in development programmes and efficient utilisation of scare resources, while helping Youth Clubs to establish themselves as a partner in the process of development

- Involvement of Youth Clubs in Gram Sabha meetings would ensure that voices of the marginalised are articulated and heard while deciding priorities of Gram Panchayats and selecting beneficiaries of various programmes
- An active and organised Youth Club in partnership with Gram Panchayats would promote a more effective relationship with the Government machinery
- The partnership will also help address emerging needs of the community's youth

It is noteworthy that the Youth Clubs have a tradition of working with the people who know the aspirations and interests of the community, and will thus be in a position to influence the decision making process of a given Gram Panchayat in favour of the people's interests. The Youth Club will also be in a position to introduce corrective measures in case the Gram Panchayats do not function properly. Such steps will, of course, be taken with due care and in consultation with other members of the Gram Sabha and by influencing the appropriate authority of Gram Panchayats. The Youth Clubs are unlikely to undermine the importance and authority of the Gram Panchayat as a constitutional body. The youth will have to work in such a way that the autonomy of the Panchayat institution is respected and recognised by all. An interface between Youth Clubs and Gram Panchayats can be evolved by the following means:

- Regular interaction
- Promotion of a co-ordination mechanism
- Carrying out capacity-cum-confidence building initiatives
- Conducting Gram Sabha awareness campaigns
- Organising Youth Clubs and Gram Panchayats around selected development issues in a campaign mode

Part III: The Initiatives

Bringing PRI and youth closer – PRIA Haryana initiatives

PRIA Haryana, dedicated to uplift the quality of democracy in India by enhancing participation of the people, has attempted to involve the youth in the process of democracy. A close collaboration between the youth and the PRI was fostered to attain the twin aim of empowering the youth and revitalising the PRIs. Details of the initiatives are provided in the following sections.

Youth and Pre-election Voter Awareness Campaign (PEVAC)

The youth of Haryana demonstrated their commitment and capacity to constructively engage with PRIs during the Panchayat elections held in 2005. The scale and intensity with which the youth leaders participated in the PEVAC in Haryana was a clear indication of their interest and willingness to systematically engage with PRIs. The effort was to make social issues an agenda for panchayat election. According to the youth involved, a meaningful engagement with PRIs can generate a huge impact on social evils such as sex-selective abortion, apathy towards girl child education, domestic violence and malnutrition. Out of the 1,440 volunteers who actively participated in the campaign, the majority (nearly 1,000) were less than 35 years of age. These volunteers were primarily from the Youth Clubs formed by NYKS. They not only organised rallies and *pad yatras*, but also conducted small group meetings in their respective villages.

To achieve the targeted coverage and to promote quality participation of civil society in this effort, PRIA initiated a process of building collective stake with a shared perspective. It was in this process of collectivisation that the need for a shared platform for implementing such a huge campaign was raised by PRIA and its key partners. As a consequence, Sanjha Kadam, a forum of CSOs on reforming local self-governance in the state was established. To begin with, it was decided that the PEVAC be organised under the banner of Sanjha Kadam with a shared perspective and within the boundaries of a common code of conduct.

Another crucial decision taken during the preparatory phase of the PEVAC was the finalisation of a formal association with NYKS in the campaign. The association of NYKS with Sanjha Kadam facilitated a wide outreach to the campaign. Simultaneously, PRIA undertook an informal exercise of district-wise mapping of CSOs. During this initial exercise, the capacity and willingness of CSOs, the nodal agency in each district, was identified to co-ordinate the PEVAC at the district level. PRIA and its old partners shouldered the responsibilities of co-ordination in the districts of Panchkula, Sonapat, Panipat, Jhajhar, Gurgaon, Rohtak, Bhiwani, Rewari, Mahendragarh and Faridabad. The district offices of NYKS co-ordinated the remaining nine districts. The district unit of NYKS set a target of 100 Gram Panchayats in the extensive mode, and 25 Gram Panchayats in the intensive mode. The partner organisations, however, decided to cover around 5-10 Gram Panchayats from their respective operational area in the intensive mode.

Besides NYKS, other civil society groups that participated in PEVAC were Mahila Mandals, Nari Networks, Youth Clubs, Village Information Centres, Voluntary Development Organisations (VDOs), Self Help Groups, Kirtan Mandalis and Matdata Jagrukta Mandalis. In addition, a large number of teachers from colleges and schools, Anganwadi workers and Gram Sevaks were also involved in a limited way.

Table 1 below provides the details of such CSOs involved throughout the state during the PEVAC:

Table 1 – Number of CSOs involved in PEVAC

S.No.	District	NGOs	CBOs	Total
1	Jhajjar	3	2	5
2	Bhiwani	1	3	4
3	Rohtak	1	2	3
4	Rewari	2		2
5	Yamunanagar	1	1	2
6	Krukshetra	1	15	16
7	Panchkula	2	1	3
8	Mahendragarh	9	39	48
9	Fatehabad	2	24	26
10	Panipat	1	4	5
11	Sonipat	1	7	8
12	Kaithal	1	29	30
13	Jind	1	27	28
14	Hisar	1	22	23
15	Sirsa	1	32	33
16	Ambala	1	8	9
17	Gurgaon	2		2
18	Faridabad	1		1
19	Karnal	6	20	26
	Total	38	236	274

The next step in the process of strengthening Sanjha Kadam and building its capacity was the organisation of two state-level training of trainers (TOTs). It was decided that teams of three would be formed and trained from each district. The team members constituted the respective district youth co-ordinator, an active youth leader of a Youth Club and a representative of a local VDO from the district.

The State Steering Committee decided that the respective district team would in turn train a pool of young volunteers from the intensive area of campaign. Care was taken to ensure gender balance among the volunteers involved in the campaign. Accordingly, 19 orientation events (one in each district) were organised. One thousand four hundred forty (1,340) people in total, with 816 males and 524 females were orientated in these programmes. Districts-wise details are given in **Table 2** below.

Table 2 – Youth Volunteers Engaged in PEVAC

S.No.	District	Volunteers Trained		
		Male	Female	Total
1	Jhajjar	25	25	50
2	Bhiwani	20	10	30
3	Rohtak	17	10	27
4	Rewari	15	34	49
5	Yamunanagar	21	41	62
6	Krukshetra	18	11	29
7	Panchkula	13	28	41
8	Mahendragarh	19	27	46
9	Fatehabad	34	4	38
10	Panipat	10	50	60
11	Sonipat	8	47	55
12	Kaithal	155	59	214
13	Jind	61	29	90
14	Hisar	133	27	160
15	Sirsa	130	35	165
16	Ambala	19	2	21
17	Gurgaon	65	0	65
18	Faridabad	10	35	45
19	Karnal	43	50	93
	Total	816	524	1340

**Figure 2: Attentive youth in an orientation workshop during PEVAC**

Table 3 – Cycle Rallies Organised by Youth Clubs

District	Villages	Coverage First Round	Coverage Second Round	Volunteers Trained		
				Male	Female	Total
Bhiwani	16	16		38	2	40
Jind	19	14	5	35	0	35
Kaithal	70	5	65	31	4	35
Rohtak	10		10	30		30
Mahendragarh	10	10	10	6		6

Table 4 – Motor Bike Rally – By Youth Club in District Kaithal

District	Villages	Coverage First Round	Coverage Second Round	Volunteers Trained		
				Male	Female	Total
Kaithal	19	6	13	25	0	25

In addition, a *pad yatra* called Prabhat Pheri was organised in Sirsa by Youth Clubs in nine villages.

Highlights of the campaign

- During the voter's list updation, linkages with the women cells in colleges were used to encourage eligible female youth to register themselves as voters. Incidentally, in Haryana, parents do not register their daughters as voters even if she has crossed 18 years. Usually, the argument is that the name will be registered by the girl's husband after her marriage. PRIA organised seminars at select colleges, opened information counters where forms for enrolling as voters was made available, and also facilitated interaction with concerned officials. Some of the interesting responses elicited during this process are shared below:

The daughter of the Sarpanch: *Mein sarpanch ki beti hun, mujhe naam shamil karvane ki kya jarurat hai (I'm the sarpanch's daughter, why do I need to include my name in the list)?*

A girl from a college: *Yeh naam voter's list mein karana jaruri toh nahi na? Kuch hoga to nahi na (It's not mandatory to include names in the voter's list, right? Nothing will happen, right)?*

A girl from the women's college (eligible voter): *Hamara naam toh shaadi ke baad hi aa sakta hai voter list mein (My name can only be included in the voter's list after my marriage).*

- During the mobilisation process, lot of youth were motivated to contest the panchayat election. The campaign informed, educated and facilitated them in filing nomination forms. For example, data from Krukshetra shows that around 40 members of Youth Clubs contested the PRI elections
- Small group meetings proved most successful during the PEVAC. In 207 villages, 1,003 small group meetings were organised for PEVAC objectives dissemination. Youth volunteers as well as villagers admired the quality and intensity of debates and discussions facilitated by such meetings
- Major focus of the youth during this campaign was to ensure that development in general and social issues—such as sex-selective abortion, girl child education and domestic violence—in particular, become the major agenda of the panchayat elections. The participatory tools used during the campaign generated debates and discussions that went beyond the issue of voting rights and raised critical issues related to the development of Panchayats. It also facilitated a process of collective reflection about the quality of a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ candidate in the light of these debates. People from all age groups, cutting across caste, creed and gender came out and contributed to the debate about the ‘nature and quality’ of their prospective panchayats. On the basis of an impact assessment survey, 1,592 voters out of 3,980 cast their votes in the name of development and good candidature.
- During the campaign, civil society organisations in Haryana covered 2,244 villages. Out of this, 493 villages were covered in intensive mode and the rest 1,751 villages were covered in extensive mode. The campaign was carried out in all the 19 districts of the state. This was largely possible due to the wide network of Youth Clubs involvement in PEVAC.
- An interesting impact of youth involvement was also observed in terms of checking on invalid and bogus voting, with posters and flashcards explaining (through visuals) the correct method of voting greatly helped uneducated rural voters to use their vote in a valid way. Demonstration in small group meetings and establishment of information camps and Jagrukta Mandali checked bogus voting and acted as watchdogs. They maintained regular interaction with the election officials and police.
- The youth also raised issues of over spending during the election process, buying and selling of votes and their adverse implications on the future of panchayats in a big way. Pointed messages about visualising the election as an opportunity to ameliorate the lives of the common people and the children left a deep impression on the minds of voters. Particularly when children and youth raised some of these issues in their Prabhat Pheris and cycle rallies. Similarly, the voter-candidate dialogue encouraged people to raise some of these critical issues with their prospective Sarpanches.

Finally, the whole process of engaging youth in PEVAC on such a large scale generated a demand at the grassroots about issues of Gram Sabha and key provisions of Haryana Panchayati Raj Act, 1994. Members of Youth Clubs started asking potential candidates about their views on Gram Sabha, constitution of sub-committees, role of PRI in girl child education etc. They demanded to know and understand the functioning of panchayats and the role of Sarpanche. As a consequence, it also sensitised and motivated many youth leaders to participate actively in Gram Sabha meetings and productively engage with PRIs.

Fostering a link between youth and Gram Sabha

The quality of decision making could be improved to a great extent if the Youth Clubs work hand in hand with panchayat and Gram Sabha members. It was presumed that involvement of Youth Clubs in Gram Sabha meetings would entail that voices of the marginalised are articulated and heard while deciding priorities of Gram Panchayats and selecting beneficiaries of various programmes.

Synergy establishment during PEVAC was retained and nurtured further during the ensuing Gram Sabha meetings after the elections. Many of the youth leaders proactively engaged in mobilising members of Gram Sabhas in participating in the Gram Sabha meetings, besides ensuring that these meetings are actually held. NYKS also played the role of facilitating the process and provided logistical support.

As part of the Gram Sabha mobilisation process, four orientation workshop for youth volunteers were organised at the district level in association with NYKS. The following **Table 5** shows the number of participants:

Table 5 – Orientation Workshop for Youth Leaders on Gram Sabha Mobilisation

District	Date	No. of Participants
Karnal	November 17, 2005	32
Ambala	November 18, 2005	30
Jind	November 21, 2005	54
Kaithal	November 22, 2005	104

Figure 3: A camp to mobilise youth and community for Gram Sabha meeting

Gram Sabha mobilisation campaigns were carried out in around 100 GPs from the above four districts. For most of the Youth Club members, it was the first sensitisation cum orientation workshop on the importance of Gram Sabha meetings. However, the feedback on their experiences about participation in Gram Sabha meetings were not very encouraging. They found serious gaps between the legal provisions on Gram Sabha meetings and its actual manifestation in their respective panchayats. In some GPs, it also resulted in some sort of confrontation with the Sarpanch. It was, however, decided that PRIA, in association with NYKS, will continue to support the select Youth Clubs from the above four districts at Gram Sabha meetings.

Building blocks between youth and Gram Panchayats

As discussed in a previous section, to enable a healthy functioning of participatory democracy, an interface between the Youth Clubs and PRI can be promoted around a development issue. PEVAC 2005-05 was a pioneering effort to engage youth on the issues of local self-governance, during which many youth were also interested in and contested the election. As a follow up, youth also engaged in PRAJA through which their capacities were strengthened.

In this context, four regional workshops on the key provision of the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act (HPRA), 1994, were organised in four districts, in which 152 volunteers participated from 32 CSOs and 34 Youth Clubs from 19 districts of Haryana.

Table 6 – Sub-regional Workshops for Youth Clubs and CSOs on PRAJA

Date	District
May 23 & 24, 2005	Fatehabad
June 2, 2005	Rohtak
June 7, 2005	Kurukshetra
June 14, 2005	Rewari



Figure 4: A training on PRAJA with Youth Clubs in association with NYKS in progress

Furthermore, capacity building efforts in the intensive area of intervention through the ongoing interface mode were carried out. The inputs varied from regular on-site support, to orientation through one-to-one meetings with the Gram Panchayats, dissemination of IEC material on a regular basis, both in print as well as audio visual forms and facilitating interactions of Elected Representatives with block and district level officials. Special learning opportunities were provided by organising exposure visits and facilitating mutual sharing among elected representatives. Exclusive workshops for women and Dalit elected representatives were organised, taking into account their context and special needs.

Based on the experience of PRIA and the lessons learned, the following successful strategies and tools for mutual association between youth/youth groups and PRI have been presented:

- Gram Panchayats could associate with Youth Clubs in the sub-committees of PRIs as per the provisions of Haryana Panchayati Raj Act, 1994
- Youth and Gram Panchayats could take up one of the developmental issues like girl child education, sex-selective abortion, health, sanitation and water to work together and demonstrate impact within a given period
- To understand work on gender perspective, special orientation, capacity building efforts can be taken up for female youth leaders and women elected representatives of PRIs. Special efforts should also be made by Youth Clubs to ensure active participation of female youth, either through ensuring their

- appropriate representation in the existing Youth Clubs, or by forming clubs exclusively for female youth
- Similarly, orientation and restructuring of Youth Clubs could be taken to ensure representation of youth from all communities, particularly the weaker sections
- Capacity building initiatives could be taken to promote active involvement of Youth Clubs in effective implementation of development programmes and schemes in co-ordination with Gram Panchayats
- A participatory monitoring and evaluation mechanism around a selected social development issue could also be developed to support and promote PRIs as institutions of local self-governance

Facilitating PRIs to deliver on adverse sex ratio with linkage with Youth Clubs

In the beginning of 2006, a series of meetings/consultations were held to strengthen the linkage between Gram Panchayats and the youth to demonstrate positive change at the grassroots. Preliminary discussion to seek possibility for intervening on the issue of sex-selective abortion by facilitating linkages between youth and panchayats was held on May 15, 2006. PRIA and NYKS facilitated this regional consultation involving most active Youth Clubs, associated with Youth Centres of Kaithal, Kurukshetra, Ambala and Karnal. The consultation involved discussion on willingness of Youth Clubs for sustaining their role to deliver on LSG, both as change agents to strengthen Panchayati Raj or by association/facilitation to identify the future course of action, areas and issues to demonstrate a guiding principle for any such initiative.

The discussion facilitated the identification of 20 most active Youth Clubs. The discussion's key facets were that Youth Clubs as well as Gram Panchayats have some institutional demands that can be met, if the linkage between the two is strengthened. It was found that there were Youth Clubs who had limited linkage with Gram Panchayats as well as those who remained isolated.

To demonstrate and strengthen the linkage between the two, participants mutually agreed upon to conduct district-wise consultations with Youth Clubs by involving concerned panchayat functionaries.

Adverse sex ratio problem: statement and causes

During these consultations, participants were asked to share the social problems of their respective villages. It came out from the discussion that issues like primary education, sex-selective abortion and cleanliness, which remain undealt with. Participants were unanimous and revealed sex-selective abortion as an issue, which needs to be dealt with urgently.

Census data was shared with participants. 'Female Foeticide in Rural Haryana' sent shockwaves through this patriarchal state. The 2001 Census has already highlighted the adverse sex ratio in Haryana. Some of the worst-affected districts are Sonapat with an adverse sex ratio of 783/1,000, Rohtak with 796/1,000, Ambala with 784/1,000 and Krukshetra with 770/1,000. This is in the 0-6 year age group. The overall sex ratio does not present a happy picture either. Census figures show that in Panchkula, the ratio is 823/1,000, Faridabad 839/1,000, Rohtak 847/1,000, Hissar 852/1000, Ambala 869/1,000, besides the situation in Karnal with 808 girls and Kaithal with only 789 girls, is grim and alarming.

The direct methods resorted to include sex determination tests such as ultrasound, poisoning and starving the new born baby girl. Indirect methods included neglecting the girl child's health and allowing her to slowly starve, two decades of female foeticide and infanticide have finally caught up with Haryana.

The participants then threw light on the consequences of a skewed sex ratio in their neighbourhood and listed the issues emerging from the situation:

- Dozens of young boys are desperate to get married, but there are no brides available
- Issues that came out during elections were “we will accept your sarpanchi only if you find bride for us.”
- The situation is so grim that families are resorting to buying girls from Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal and passing them off as members of their own ‘biradari’ (community)
- “Most of these girls being brought into Haryana are paid for and end up being treated as bonded labour”
- “Polygamy is common in Haryana and men marry twice and thrice to get a male child. I won't be surprised if, due to the shortage of brides, families start reverting to the earlier practice of polyandry where one bride was shared by male members of a family.”
- “Pimps are now functioning as marriage bureaus and girls sold for prostitution are now available for a monthly rent of Rs. 5,000.”
- “Often the clients don't marry these girls and they are kept as *rakhails* or mistresses.”
- “There are cases when these brides run away with family valuables.”
- “Single men are involved in all sorts of violence, including sexual violence.”
- “Villages are becoming increasingly insecure, particularly for women. Cases of rape and eve teasing are also frequent.”
- “Prostitution and murder for claiming the inherited property of unmarried descendants are also increasing.”

Gender and sex

An exclusive session during these consultations focused on identifying the traditional views of participants on gender, besides intending to develop clarity with regards to gender and sex. During the discussion, participants raised various issues like:

- *Aurat hi bachha paida kar sakti hai* (Only women can give birth)
- *Navjaat shishu ki dekhbhaal sirf ma ka kam hai* (Nurturing babies is solely the responsibility of the mother)
- *Aurat komal aur kamjor hoti hain* (Women are frail and weak)
- *Aur ek achi sainik nahi ho sakti hain* (They cannot be good soldiers)

On throwing these questions around, it was seen how initial sanction to the above statements were equally opposed by others. The resource person was merely facilitating the discussion so that each one can provide youth and panchayat with a platform to demonstrate collaboratively on a development issue.

The participants then sat as village-wise groups, to prepare their action plan.



Figure 5: Media reports of PRIA's initiatives on youth and panchayats get opportunity to share their views

The response stated that nature has provided females with the physiological capacity to give birth, however, there are no differences in their capacity. Examples of Kalpana Chawla, Kavita Yadav and Kumari Shailja were given, and cases were discussed which revealed that there are women driving tractors, operating cultivators and harvesters. The group shared that in Haryana, women work more than men.

Finally, the discussion was consolidated by clarifying the physiological differences between men and women. It was observed that post puberty development never demarcates the role division for reproducing and never hinders the physical capacity of either. Further, the participants were asked whether they agreed to the above thought. Surprisingly, all agreed to the conclusion. Although this short exercise was just ornamental as this subject itself required a lot of time. This discussion was, however, successful in making the participants question themselves. Participants were also told that sex-selective abortion is governed more by traditional approaches of unnecessarily differentiating between girls and boys, when the Government has

dedicated 2006-07 as the year of girl child, and is running various innovative approaches to promote girl children in various ways. It is inaccurate to say that men run the family or is a support in old age. If these were true, thousands of aged parents would not be abandoned by children and end up in old age homes.

The focus of the discussion was to derive a process to ensure that sex-selective abortion can be controlled. Participants were unanimous in addressing the issue of sex-selective abortion, they suggested that community monitoring, awareness building, database building of pregnant women, monitoring of ANMs, AWW, identification of people involved in pre-natal detection of sex and those facilitating this illegal process, etc., be carried out.

On getting these responses, it was realised that the provision of sub-committee can now be shared with participants. Finally, the participants were told about Section 22 of HPRRA providing for the formation of three sub-committees, namely sub-committees for Production, Social Justice and Amenities. The purpose of these three was shared with the participants. The participants, in turn, said that these sub-committees have not been formed in their Gram Panchayats. Special stress was given on formation of the Social Justice sub-committee that will contribute not only for environment building but Section 22 of HPRRA will provide youth and other CBOs the opportunity to involve all three or any of these sub-committees. Thus, the Social Justice sub-committee could function as the regulatory system for sex-selective abortion. During the process, both PRIs and youth clubs realised that an organic interface around issues like sex-selective abortion can promote a meaningful and productive interface between the two institutions. The initiatives taken by youth on issues like sex-selective abortion has greatly helped them to establish their social image not only among villagers, but also with other stakeholders, specially the Government. Regular interface with the Government was an integral part of this endeavour to synergise youth and panchayats towards participative democracy.

Interface with the Government

The partnership between the youth and PRIs has built and developed an effective interface with Government agencies as well. For best outcomes from the interface, Government officials have been sensitised to reciprocate this relationship in a partnership mode, rather than treating panchayats as their implementing agencies. This demands that Government agencies/officials demonstrate sensitivity to the special needs of youth and elected representatives.

Most of the Youth Club members are either unemployed or semi-employed. Youth Clubs need to undertake income-generating activities either at the individual level, or on a co-operative basis to address this problem. On the other hand, Gram Panchayats also need to generate financial resources. As of now, they largely depend on aids/grants provided by Government agencies. Resources available with Government agencies can be utilised to promote entrepreneurial skills of youths in association with PRIs, to help the latter generate financial resources.

Against this backdrop, realising the need of partnerships between PRIs and organised Youth Clubs and unorganised youth, the Minister of Panchayati Raj and Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India, formulated the scheme of Panchayat Yuva Shakti Abhiyaan (PYSA). Haryana is the pioneer of the movement as PYSA was launched here for the first time in June 2006. PRIA's State Resource Center, Haryana, facilitated the preparation of the first draft of a charter on 'Youth and Panchayats'. The Charter was developed for the successful implementation of PYSA.

On June 19-20, 2006, PYSA was launched in the presence of Shri. Mani Shankar Iyer, Minister of Panchayati Raj and Youth Affairs, Government of India, and Shri Bhupender Singh Hooda, Chief Minister, Haryana. In this campaign, over 600 youth and elected representatives of PRIs from Haryana and several voluntary development organisations participated. The youth charter prepared by the committee was discussed and deliberated in five sub-groups. The suggestion and the inputs from them were taken and incorporated in the charter. Individual views were shared by approximately 55 participants in front of Sri Mani Shankar Iyer. Devolution emerged as one of the key concerns and was shared by the Minister with the Chief Minister.

The PYSA aims to ensure development at the grassroots level with co-operation between the panchayats and the youth by making young people an active participant in the local democracy. As panchayats play a major role in the administration of rural development, it needs tremendous public support. Undoubtedly, the participation of youth and Youth Clubs in the villages makes it more amenable to collaborative work in the development process.

Interventions of Youth Clubs will definitely help improve people's participation in governance. Therefore, the relationship between youth organisations and governance could be mutually reinforced. The members of Youth Clubs are part of the participatory system of Gram Panchayat, as members of the Gram Sabha. They also get elected to PRIs and become part of the representative system. Empowerment of youth is, therefore, important to empower panchayats as effective institutions. Thus, making this age group more informed and empowered will improve the quality of participation.

One of the objectives of PYSA is to empower the youth and Youth Clubs to mobilise the community and improve the environmental actions through the linked steps of assessment, awareness, actions and advocacy for effective Panchayati Raj system. For this, they work towards awareness of the people, focused training, monitoring and evaluation, networking and implementation of programmes. The focus is to develop inter-linkages between youth groups and PRIs and empowering the youth for decision making.

It has been suggested under PYSA that the panchayats may constitute 'standing committees on youth'. The implementation strategy for forging a youth partnership for development through PRIs should be mutually beneficial to each other. The programme interventions of PYSA will have the following components:

- Capacity building of PRIs and Youth Clubs
- Capacity enhancement through skill upgradation
- Sharing of access and awareness between Youth Clubs and Gram Panchayats
- Intensive programmes, mainly related to social and human development

The Youth Charter for the State of Haryana proposes the following point of action for better youth action:

- A special campaign for empowering and activating Youth Clubs and forming new Youth Clubs to cover all villages of the state. The joint orientation training programme to be organised for the capacity building of Youth Clubs and PRIs
- Youth Clubs will be developed and motivated to help PRIs in generating local resources and mobilising community participation in development programmes

- NYKS will provide a joint forum for members of Youth Clubs and representatives of PRIs for preparation of road map related to youth programmes and other development programmes for villages
- Concrete steps through PYSA to ensure sufficient and effective participation of women and backward classes in the PRIs and their involvement in development activities. The effective co-operation and co-ordination will also be developed with Panchayat Mahila Shakti Abhiyan.

The following seven-point programme will be presented in the special meeting of Gram Sabhas for implementation under the PYSA:

- i. All children aged 5-10 years will go to school (100% enrolment, re-admission and 0% dropout). All illiterate/ semi-literate representatives of PRIs and Youth Clubs will be made functionally literate within a year
 - ii. All village children will be immunised and pregnant mothers will be provided health care (100%)
 - iii. No pregnant women of the village will go for sex determination tests (SDT) and there will be no foeticide in the village. Women will be respected and given equal rights
 - iv. Water literacy programme will be implemented in every village for water conservation and its proper management. The supply of safe drinking water in all villages will be ensured
 - v. All members of the Gram Sabha and Youth Clubs will be made aware of drug abuse and HIV AIDS. Special campaign will be launched to save the youth of Haryana from drug abuse, to set an example for the rest of the country
 - vi. All young persons in the villages will be motivated to participate in sports, yoga , physical exercises, meditation, etc., to make them physically fit, mentally alert and emotionally balanced. PYSA will co-ordinate with Panchayat Khel-Kood Abhiyan
 - vii. New opportunities for employment generation will be created for village youth through vocational training, skill development and income generating activities. Co-ordination with block level 'Rural Business Hubs' will be established. The youth of Haryana will play an important role in promoting diversification in agriculture and starting agro and food processing units
- A joint special campaign by PRIs and Youth Clubs will be carried out in the State to end gender discrimination and promote women empowerment and girl child education
 - A library-cum-information centre (Jan Shikshan Nilayam) will be established in all the villages of Haryana to provide opportunity for dissemination of information about development schemes and programmes along with necessary information and knowledge pertinent to the common life of people. This will be linked to e-governance too.
 - This campaign will also incorporate the efforts made in the village towards successful implementation and creation of a favourable environment for desired co-operation for national priority programmes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, National Rural Drinking Water Scheme, National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Right to Information, Bharat Nirman and social welfare schemes of the State Government.
 - Suitable educated youth, on voluntary basis, will also work in schools facing a shortage of teachers
 - A joint effort will be made to promote high standards of moral and social values in the life of villagers

This Charter expects the Government of Haryana to take action on the following:

- i. Implementation, on priority basis, of all clauses of the MoU signed between the Government of India and the State Government on August 22, 2005
- ii. The department of Rural Development and Panchayat and youth services should provide funds directly to Gram Panchayats for organising rural youth programmes
- iii. All Gram Panchayats must spend certain percentage of their annual budget for development projects on youth programmes and activities
- iv. There should be a provision of quorum for the meeting of Gram Sabhas. At least four meetings should be held in a year. The dates of meetings of each Gram Sabha should be fixed and notified for the remaining tenure of the Gram Panchayat
- v. The provision of Nyaya Panchayats should be made in the Panchayati Raj Act so that villagers receive inexpensive and swift justice
- vi. Information on Panchayat Raj and local self-government should be included in the syllabi of primary to secondary school education
- vii. Special training and sensitising programmes should be organised for officials of rural development and panchayat, youth services and related department so that there is a change in their thinking, behaviour and style of functioning that is suitable for grassroots democratic institutions
- viii. The sub-committees of Gram Panchayats should be made active. At least 40 per cent youth should be given representation in these committees. Their meeting should be held regularly, at least once a month. The president of the Youth Club should be allowed to attend meetings of the Gram Panchayat as a special invitee
- ix. State Government should provide land, infrastructure and required funds for promotion of sports in the village as well as introduce Panchayat Khel-Kood Abhiyan
- x. There should be a provision of social audit of programmes implemented by PRIs
- xi. All Gram Panchayats should provide land, free of cost, to Youth Clubs for the construction of their offices and for the implementation of PYSA.

Reflections!

The initial efforts of PRIA to promote participation of youth in PRIs was greeted with skepticism and misplaced fear at the level of elected PRI members as well as the local bureaucracy. Youth Clubs were primarily visualised as an unwarranted interference in the smooth functioning of PRIs. While the goal of PRIA to promote this synergy was to encourage meaningful mass participation in the election process and Gram Sabha meetings, this effort was perceived as a roadblock. The results of the past two years in this context have, however, not only demystified some of these misplaced assumptions, but have provided a lot of scope to engage this untapped human resource to constructively engage in addressing many of the social evils, which Haryana is presently grappling with.

Informed youth opinion with strong institutional support can give PRIs the necessary momentum. Face-to-face dialogue between panchayats and Youth Clubs facilitated by intermediary organisations like PRIA have demonstrated that it is possible to work out a systematic plan of action to collectively address issues like sex-selective abortion and health.

Youth leadership in Haryana can also be effectively utilised to empower the Panchayati Raj system by demanding devolution of finance and functionaries to PRIs in the state. This was amply demonstrated during the convention of PYSA when more than 300 youth from across the state demanded devolution of powers to panchayats. The Youth Charter adopted during the convention provides a roadmap to realise these goals. The Charter, however, should not only help establishing a synergy between the PRIs, a Constitutional entity, and Youth Clubs, a civil society formation, but should also provide a framework to demonstrate concrete positive change at the grassroots. This will ensure quality participation in development programmes on the one hand and facilitate efficient utilisation of scarce resources on the other. In the process, the Youth Clubs can establish themselves as a 'partner' in the process of development. A vibrant and organised Youth Club (aware of power and responsibilities of PRIs) in partnership with Gram Panchayats would promote a more effective relationship with the Government machinery. The partnership will also help address the emerging needs of youth in rural areas.

Making a Mark! Gauging the Synergy of Youth and Panchayat at PRIA's 25th Anniversary

As a part of its silver jubilee celebrations, PRIA conducted a state-level consultation on the topic of, 'Democratizing Democracy: Participation of Youth and Women in Governance', at Haryana Bhavan, Chandigarh, on 20th December 2006. This event made a mark with the participants as it underscored the important role that youth can play and have played in making our democracy better.

Samta Kumari, President, Ekta Yuvti Club, Ambala, emphasised the role youth have always played in the upliftment of society. However, with a tinge of disappointment, she observed that the majority of today's youth who should essentially be using their strength for positive work in society are focusing their energies towards negative work. She said, "Two issues come to our mind—how should we include the power of the youth towards creative activities, and the other, how to increase the participation of youth in the Panchayati system. But the issue worth pondering over here is that while there is no direction to the youth for creative activities, there is also depression among the youth. And the interest of today's youth in Panchayati Raj Institutions is declining steadily. They have no knowledge on Gram Sabhas as well as PRIs. Youth today are moving further away from these things."

"We regret that there is no effort at including the participation of youth in the Gram Sabha at any level. The main reason for this lack of interest is at the block level, where work only seems to limit itself to paperwork. Representatives at the Block level have not shown any interest to rectify this, but in villages where there have been efforts to enlist the participation of youth, there has been a marked increase in the participation of women and youth at Gram Sabhas.

"Apart from this, in the areas of social issues, PRIA along with District Yuva Vikas Sangh, Ambala, have been working towards addressing the issues of sex-selective abortion under the panchayat and youth initiatives. Under this project, the panchayats and youth have been working together by adopting various measures to bring an end to sex-selective abortion.

"It is very encouraging for us to see how PRIA is engaging with the youth and taking youth forward in all their work. Other NGOs should learn from them and also do the same.

"Youth should be linked with activities of the PRIs and they should be made aware of their responsibilities, PRI officials too have to become aware of their duties so that there is an increased participation of youth at the Gram Sabhas. PRI systems too require to be enforced effectively everywhere. Utilising the strength of the youth effectively to address issues such as sex-selective abortion is a big challenge for us today."

Dharambir Singh, Chief Parliamentary Secretary, Government of Haryana, stated that youth should be encouraged to attend Gram Sabhas. He also declared that the Haryana Government had plans to build stadiums in 112 villages so that the energy of the youth is diverted towards sports and not towards negative pursuits. Finally, he opined that 80% of elected representatives in the PRIs should be the youth.

Rajesh Tandon, President, PRIA, said that it is important to think about what examples we are setting for the youth of today, and what spaces we are leaving for

them to intervene into. He said, "When we were young, we looked at the freedom movement for inspiration. The youth of today are at a loss for which path to follow and lack inspiration. So we, the older generation have to remember our responsibility towards the youth and think about setting inspired examples for them to follow. Today, the youth are a majority and their strength can be used very effectively towards the development of our villages. We have to listen to what they have to say and be ready for their suggestions. We have to remember to encourage the youth so that they can become the solution for our country's future development."

Paramjit Singh, Yuva Jagruk Sangh, Ambala, mentioned that there is no awareness on Gram Panchayats among the youth, there is limited interaction between the youth and the Gram Panchayats. The main reason being that people have no information on Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas. He added, "As for issues such as sex-selective abortion, we have to be aware and if we are aware that there is a woman who is pregnant somewhere and is thinking of committing foeticide, we have to go there and work at changing her mind set."

On a more positive note, Nirmal Singh, Pradhan, Yuva Vikas Mandal, Kurukshetra, pointed out that the youth in his village have banned alcohol, have conducted blood donation camps and were involved in tree plantation. The youth also helped earthquake victims with clothes, food and money.

Thus, it was evident from the views shared by the participants at the state level consultation that the youth have the potential to bring light into areas of darkness. Through proper guidance and by providing the right opportunities every young person can be turned into a positive change maker. In conclusion, positive steps should be taken to link youth with the activities of the PRIs and other social responsibilities to ensure their participation and involvement in the process of democracy.

Kailash Kamboj: A guiding star!

Kailash is a 23-year-old girl with bright eyes and a vivacious spirit, who redefined the role of young women in her village, Sahida Wala, at Sirsa district, Haryana. Driven by a strong motivation to work for the community, Kailash went for an interview for National Service Volunteer (NSV). However, since the vacancy was already filled from the area, Kailash's name did not appear in the final list. Nonetheless, with her indefatigable courage, she decided to do something similar to NSV in her village and so she formed a youth club with inspiration from NYKS. She was elected as the president of the youth club and started a journey by guiding the youth in her village toward a new direction of constructive work for community development and greater participation at the grassroots level.

Prior to the 2005 panchayat elections, PRIA, together with NYKS, initiated a PEVAC campaign, in which the youth were actively involved in spreading awareness among villagers about panchayat elections and the necessity of attending a Gram Sabha. In this campaign, youth leaders were identified across Haryana to lead the campaign in their respective areas. That was how Kailash was identified and given the task of encouraging youth participation. She fondly remembers how after a series of meetings and a lot of persuasion, she managed to get the permission from the ADC of Sirsa district to use a Government vehicle for the campaign. She also recollects her struggle to motivate her peers to participate in the PRI elections and understand the significance of the PRIs and Gram Sabhas.

On a personal front, she says that marriage is on the cards. But that is not going to come in her way of working for the community as she wishes to become the Sarpanch of the village. She says that she will get married to truly realise the bonding between youth and panchayats.

Satpal: A leader by example

Not very far from Sirsa, in a small village amid lush green fields lies the village Pili Mandari where Satpal lives. The young man of 28 hopes of giving a better life to his fellow villagers. From a very tender age of 16 years, Satpal found himself interested in standing for his rights. He narrated how he and his friends went on a strike in their village school, because the teachers would not come to the school regularly. His actions drew the attention of the administration and ensured regular attendance of the teachers in the school. Thus, from a very early stage, Satpal understood the significance of being proactive.

Consequently, Satpal became the president of the youth club of his village and led a group of young people to achieve various development goals. Sports, cleanliness, discipline, moral values, etc., became the topics of their discussions instead of regular conversations. In 2005, to carry out the PEVAC programme, Satpal was contacted by PRIA in the Bhattu Block of Fatehabad district. According to Satpal, till then he and his peers did not realise how they could contribute to the Gram Panchayat. They did not really think that the panchayat was their arena, as it seemed more like an area for the elderly. However, the orientation that they received from PRIA changed their perspective and they saw the potent synergy between the youth and the panchayat to promote greater participation and better democracy.

Thus, for the first time ever, with support from PRIA, Satpal and his youth club members saw to it that Gram Sabhas were held regularly and in the correct way. Since then, there has been no looking back and under the able leadership of Satpal, the youth club of the village and the Gram Panchayat have co-existed, providing support to each other.

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