



Knowledge. Voice. Democracy.

PRI

occasional paper

March 2002

Coalition Building for Self-Governance of the Panchayati Raj Institutions

Introduction

In the last ten years since the enactment of the Amendment, various studies, group discussions with villagers, representatives at the local level, community based organisations as well as government functionaries reveal that Panchayati Raj Institutions are not being recognized as self-governing institutions. Self-governing institutions meaning that panchayats do not have the complete autonomy in determining/defining their own social, economic and political development. Such an autonomy calls for a power shift from the top to the bottom the need for such a shift was expressed with the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in '93/94. However, the amendment by itself does not guarantee such a shift. For such a transfer to be made/ reached, some form of support mechanism in-built, within the community needs to be in place - like some form of "Coalition".

Coalition here is seen an act of linking horizontally or coming together of people for the purpose of self or community well-being. In developmental terms, it would be called as a space wherein information, sharing of experiences, learning and even pressure building could ensue.

Why Make a new body?

Consider the parable of the elephant and the blind men. Several blind men walking through the jungle come upon an elephant. Each approaches the elephant from a different angle and comes into contact with different part of the elephant's anatomy. The blind man who comes in contact with the elephant's leg declares that the elephant is like a tree trunk. Another, who approaches the elephant's tail, objects to the first's description exclaiming that the elephant is like a rope. A third grasping the elephant's large floppy ears, insists that the elephant is like a fan. Clearly, each man from his vantage point has apprehended something important and genuine about the elephant. Each one's perception of elephant is accurate, though limited. None of the blind men through their own enquires have a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon called "elephant". Together, by sharing information they have a much richer and more complete perspective.

Similar instances have been sighted in reality where organisations (Voluntary organisations or community based organisation)/ newly elected members in the Panchayati Raj work in parallel to another with an aim to strengthen governance -the elephant (here I will call it the issue). But each of them can tackle only a part of the large problem, be it discrimination against Dalits, enhancement of women's participation, lack of information and so on. Where do they all converge in order to tackle the issue/ problem (the elephant) together Where do they search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible?

Respect for differences is an easy virtue to champion and a much more difficult one to put into practice in our day-to-day affairs. Yet differences are often the source of immense creative potential. Learning to harness that potential is what formation of a common platform/ the body of coalition is all about.

PRIA and its Partners experiences in Coalition building has been viewed and facilitated in two ways

- A. Civil Society Coalition (Community based organisations, Vas others)
- B. Panchayati Raj, elected members (women, Dalits, mixed) coalition

A. Coalition of civil society

Civil society action takes many forms - some have stated them to be spaces wherein they are open and accessible, while some are seen as movements for advancing various cases and others are organisations of an intermediary type enhancing capacities, voices, articulation of citizens. Where do they all converge? From our experience in working towards strengthening grass-root democracy, single organisation or institution often does not have the political space within the region or are new to the field. They might not have any legitimate visibility in that area to gain citizens acceptance. Also, they might not have adequate resources (tools, man power or money) to solve such problems. Forming a "Coalition" was thought as a strategy wherein these various forms of organisations - space, movements and intermediaries- with different capacities come together within a region that may accomplish what is impossible for any of them working by themselves. The coalition, hence in time be regarded as the space in which information, sharing of experiences and learning could take place. Become a space for organizing movements for advancing various causes or raising the voice of the voiceless like the Dalits or women and would also play an intermediary role for advocacy.

Case 1: The coalition of community based organisations, NGOs, and others for Panchayats in Andhra Pradesh provided the space where in parties who see/ work on different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible.

One such advantage with the building of "forum for Panchayats" in AP was that it was built on the grounds of emerging social difficulty - voter and candidate awareness. It brought to the table organisations varied in their approach and target group. The organisations that came to the table for discussions and eventually made up the Forum for Panchayats were:

- COVA (Muslim/ women target group)
- CWS (farmers/ SHGs/ women and children)
- DAPPU
- DBF (Dalit network working on Caste issues)
- DD NN (regional network of voluntary organisations)
- LOK SATTA (political organisation/ electoral practices)
- PRIA (educational support organisation with special emphasis on marginalized groups)

This coalition helped by way of addressing the issue of participation in Panchayat elections by each working within their area of intervention with one goal of increasing participation and similar strategy. This decreased the level of duplication as well as increased the possibility of innovations and scaling-up to cover the whole state.

Case 2: Kishori Panchayats were formed by CENCORED, a partner of PRIA in order to reach out to the women panchayat leaders and women in general in the villages of Bihar. On an experiment bases a group of young girls were selected and train in the working of Panchayats. This experiment led in the creation of **Kishori panchayat or adolescent girls' panchayats in Bochahan, Muzaffarpur, Bihar**. In 1997-1998, this novel experiment with girls between the age group of 7-17 years was tapped as being a potential source and channel to reach women at the Panchayat level as it was found that these girls have both the accessibility and credibility with the community. These young women were trained in first - and foremost the Panchayat election procedures. For getting the message home, the organization conducted a mock Panchayat election through the 'Kishori Panchayats' which involved processes including filling and filing nominations, campaigning and actual polling. This initiative was seen not only to energize interest among women in the panchayats but also to provide some sort of security in attending village meetings, reading circulars and voicing their opinions. It was also felt that this initiative would pave the way for the future, when these girls attain the age of voting.

In the recent Panchayat election, which was taking place after twenty-three years, this experiment paid off well. It was beneficial in supporting a whole generation especially women, who did not have a first-hand experience of Panchayats and election procedures. These small groups of adolescent girls moved around in their own villages to get the women in purdah and old out to cast their votes.

This case shows coalitions with creativity. It was an outcome of capacity building initiative for women leaders by the organisation. They found that these adolescent girls have greater accessibility and acceptability within the women folks. This group was effectively utilized to spread awareness prior to elections, Gram Sabha meetings and subsequently tapped to disseminate information regarding health issues.

The concept of micro level planning of involving people in plan formulation and implementation has been in vogue right from the days of implementation of community development programmes, where people's role and participation has been continuously stressed. Yet in practice putting people in the centre of planning process has remained a dream. Increasing participation, especially of women and marginalised sections of the community, is another arena that civil society have influenced. Facilitation in identifying local needs, prioritising the same and implementing programmes have been possible when capacity building interventions have been made in collaboration with local community based organisations, the state as well as some established rapport at the local level like youth groups. and former army individuals.

Case 3: In collaboration with a local NGO, PRIA facilitated participatory micro-planning process in Kehar Gram Panchayat of Mandi District in Himachal Pradesh. The Village Development Committees (VDCs), made for the purpose comprised of members from different castes and gender (school teachers, retired army officers' others) of the villages in that panchayat. They were made responsible for preparing and implementing the panchayat plan. These VDCs, ensured accountability to the Gram Panchayat to make and implement the plan. They pressurised (and assisted) the panchayat to negotiate with villagers, block and the district level officials to mobilise internal and external resources for implementation of plan.

The Civil Society facilitation thus enabled local bodies to engage in participatory bottom-up micro-planning processes to determine priorities and design programmes which address locally appropriate needs of different segments of the community. This capacity building intervention also enables greater engagement of different sections of the local community in the planning process through the VDC coalition, thereby enhancing ownership of plans and programmes implemented by local bodies.

Some coalition building was a direct programmatic thrust of organisations in sharing learning as well as to act as pressure groups in the case of advocacy purposes.

Case 4: In western Rajasthan, UNNATI began a campaign for the rights of Dalits. This was called as the 'Dalit Adhikar Abhiyan', to curb and challenge discriminatory practices prevalent in the region. This campaign took up mobilisation and capacity building of the Dalit community in order to enable them to fight against discrimination, as well as sensitising other people such as the government officials, the police, media, other civil society actors and the judiciary machinery. This has given rise to about one hundred and seventy-five cases related to discrimination of Dalits and set the ball rolling on inquiry about them by the National Commission of Scheduled Caste and Schedule Tribes and other civil society institutions.

Such organised campaigns for the cause of Dalits have been few and documentation of such efforts has been lesser still, but emphasis and constant raising voice regarding untouchability has put such issues back on the agenda of civil society and also ensure recognition by the government.

Experiences within the Process of forming coalition: Methods/tools of building coalition (steps, facilitation, Discussions)

1. Clarity on Issues to be tackled or addressed- As stated in the beginning an organisation very often does not have the necessary capacity to address issues on its own. This is when the organisation tries to find other organisations, which either works or would like to work on similar issues of concern. For that purpose, the organisation initiating coalition/ collaboration needs to be clear as to what the issue is- be in lack of awareness or participation like in Case 1, enhancing the capacity of women leaders as in Case 2, or human rights issue of Dalits. This would provide clarity with regard to the goal/ mission of the coalition.

2. Creating the environment: Once the issue/ the problem is identified it is easier to put forth the case in front of other actors or organisations in order to reach an understanding that the issue/ problem concerned is pivotal to work on at present. For the purpose of coalition building PRIA-AP consulted the local government or the state and held talks. They got a whole list of the organisations working in the state. The staff visited some of the organisation working on capacity building of citizens. Face-to-face meetings with the organisation were held in order to discuss positive outcomes that have been tried in other states through similar interventions in order to reach a shared understanding upon the issue concerned and a willingness to work together for the cause.

Similarly, with the building up of Kishories. Once the need was identified as the lack of awareness among the newly elected women leaders CENCORED sought alternative avenue to reach women (looking into the language, literacy level and others). During the training sessions the organisation saw that the women were constantly turning to the girls accompanying them. On enquiry they found that the children had grasped the concepts and roles of a leader (which was the module) and this led to tapping the potential of these girls. The organisation took the steps to meet with the girl's mothers, meet with teachers to send the girls to training programmes, sessions on Panchayati Raj were organized for Teachers. This led to the selection and training of active Kishories on Panchayati Raj issues like Gram Sabha, role and responsibilities (through films, games and mock elections).

3. Collective decision making (Objective) Participation (with the view in arriving at a collective decision, participation of all the members in the coalition is necessary but difficult. It is difficult to get total participation of all the members. A challenge that was faced by the 'forum for Panchayats (Andhra Pradesh)' wherein members, in the early month were active through contribution/ suggestions. These energies slowly dwindled in the end to just a few. But communication was open and when decisions were taken the majority voice was there. As of Case 4, the members / Dalit leaders assembled in the beginning of every month to plan their course of action after receiving inputs from the various villages. These meetings also provided the platform to share interventions that have worked and also the failures.

4. Co-ordination and building of steering committee (Leadership): Selection of a core group or person that would steer the coalition to its rightful goal. For that selection of a leader/ committee was seen as the next stage. A steering group was constituted as in Case 1 to take decision as to media strategy, the number of posters, and coverage. The steering group of the coalition also liaised with administration and the State Election Commission to enlist their co-operation.

5. Creativity: Experimentation /Creativity/ Innovation in strategizing would be brought in when dissimilar people are working together. To tackle the cause of lack of awareness, accessibility to information, issues of monitoring and advocacy requires the coalition to work out new agendas, have new ways of articulating mission and strategy then can there be scaling -up of impact and influence newly. Idea of roping in Dalit and Muslim organisations in Andhra Pradesh during awareness building prior to elections, led to reaching out to a large section of marginalized people for the first time. In Case 2 the training of Kishories in Folk media and Panchayati Raj helped in disseminating information to a large section of neo-/ illiterate people. The involvement of community people, teachers and elected members in the Village Development committee to look into the implementation of their development plan in Case 3 gave the village of Khere a sense of ownership.

6. Commitment/ complementarities and division of labor: Division of work on the basis of aptitude, skill and experiences are the stage when the strategies are finalized and the work is ready to be implemented.

Case 1. Each organisation took on various districts to intervene in building awareness. Some were given two districts and other two blocks within a state seeing their manpower and resources. While in Case 2. Each Kishori (adolescent girl) was given the target to make 5-10 women aware about the message of Panchayati Raj. Subsequently these Kishories were linked with women workers so that together they became a living force in the process of local self-governance. This also enables the optimal use of each partners strength either in advocacy, or in the community, or mobilizing the media or even designing learning Materials.

7. Future working Together: Follow-up in any intervention keeps the coalition alive and active. It must be indicated that there will be a further use for the coalition. For instance, in case 2. the Kishori Panchayat, came in use in awareness generation of other kinds like health issues and literacy missions. While the Dalit coalition found 170 cases of atrocities to work on and monitor.

B. Coalition of Panchayat elected members: Why make a new body?

Another type of coalition building is within the government itself. That is in strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions the elected members of this body come together and voice their concerns or issues the members of these bodies, being new to the working of the institution, are often at a disadvantage in negotiating with bureaucrats, politicians, higher castes/ dominant castes.

Most of the times Panchayati Raj Institutions have been deemed as the third tier of governance (the lowest rung reaching the village). But very few have recognized that PRIs are governments by themselves. Problems of lack of communication, information, lack of devolution of powers, resources, "No body hears us" are some of the issues emerging from this institution around India. What if there was a space which provided the opportunity / support to the elected representative of the people to VOICE their demands and act as pressure groups?

Case 1: Sangathan of Barwala is a coalition of 35 sarpanchas within the Barwala block of Haryana. The sangathan has had taken up issues concerning the whole block solving 17 pressing problems locally that have never been taken up by the state. Of these problems the problem of flies arising due to negligence of the poultry farm owners was noteworthy. The sangathan (coalition) presented the problem to the District collector (DC) stating that a PIL would be lodged if the poultry farm owners do not address the issue within a month. Subsequently, the DC fixed a meeting with the poultry farm owners association giving them one more month to solve the problem. In that time, every poultry farm was to clean its form and mix a chemical in the bird feed so that the faecal matter produced by the bird is not able to produce flies. With the sangathan monitoring the process with close check by the government officers within a month the prevalence of flies reduced.

The above case of coalition is a direct outcome of the orientation, which PRIA Haryana conducted for newly elected Panchayat members in March 2001. It was a felt need among the elected members of PRI, that issues have not been addressed

in the block of Barwala and the Government functionaries were not responsive of the queries. Hence, the coalition was formed as a pressure group.

Case 2: Mahila Panchayat Sangh. a coalition of women leaders was facilitated by Sabhagi Shikshan Kendra (SSK) in Kasmanda Block of Sitapur district in Uttar Pradesh. It was a felt need by the women elected members to have a platform wherein they could discuss their issues and problem of their panchayats. The Sangh consist of 53 women leaders who meet once a month and prioritized their issues and place them before the block officers. Thee network is still at its primal stage and representatives are still grappling with what direct gain (tangible) will the sangh give to each of the members.

Women members' coalition is not an easy task when question of purpose, degree of gains and availability of resources comes into question. Even when the organisation that proposed and spelt out the benefits of a coalition among the women newly elected members the basic question that they had to face from the women was what tangible gain they would have out of coming together.

Case 3: The Sangathan of Mukhya and Ward Members has been facilitated by CENCORED in Madhubhani. Bihar. This network consists of 461 members, with an executive committee of 33 members. one member from each Panchayat. The coalition was facilitated in an orientation programme arises from the groups need to overcome the pressures from the Panchayat Samiti and from the government officials. The meeting among the mukhyas are not taking place as most of them were occupied in their own panchayats problem and struggling for power, while the coalition formed among the ward members are meeting in a month. One of the impetus seen in this ward representative's coalition is the drive to gain recognition apart from the mukhyas and a defense mecharusm from external threats'

External threat to the coalition of ward members is the politicians and the Government officials in their lack of sharing information and super imposing agendas. Hence both the political and the personal forces arc acting | sustaining the coalition of the ward members.

Case 4: Samarthan initiated a coalition of women Sarpanch and panch members on Women's day in 1998. 30 women elected members came together with a purpose of sharing experiences and difficulties faced in managing their affairs, to collectively raise the issue forced by them with the district, administration and other bodies i.e. Janpad and Zilla Parishad and to build collective confidence to deal with socio-cultural differences at the Panchayat level to demonstrate their leadership abilities. This coalition could not be formalized.

This network was planned to be utilized during the second round of Panchayat elections process to promote participation of women candidates in their panchayats as well as in other areas also.

Experiences within the Process of forming coalitions: Methods/ tools of building coalition (steps, facilitation, discussions)

1. **Creating an environment:** For facilitating a coalition of newly elected Panchayat Members (both ward as well as Sarpanchs), it is important to build rapport and trust. This took various forms. Like in Case 1, Barwala, the organisations staff took part in a government training for newly elected members wherein they introduced their future roles in the area. This was soon followed by personally meeting some of the elected members. Rapport building in other cases was already established where the organisation have been working. While in Case 2, in Sitapur seeing that the attendance of women representative was low in meetings the organisation staff sent letters as well as had face-to-face discussion with the women representatives.
2. **Catalyst:** Catalyst could be in the form of an idea or an event or a person that provokes stimulates and creates the possibility of actual coalition/ collaboration unfolding. In all the cases cited above capacity building or orientation of newly elected Panchayat representatives led to the idea being discussed as well as taken up by the representative as a felt need which would enable their working and sharing problems and strategies.
3. **Periodic Face-to-face interaction:** Open communication and periodic meeting of the member of the coalition would enable solidarity. clarity and most important sharing of experiences/ problems. Case 1 and 2. the elected members meet every month to discuss the state of affairs in the various panchayats. Case 2, Though meetings were held for the Mahila Sangh, the meetings were attended by the executive body only in the beginning and well as few others. Seeing the Mahila Sangh (a few of them) meeting often and discussing issues, led to spreading the word that and drawing other women members of the panchayats into the Sangh. Hence the number of memberships went from 1-1 to 53 women representatives.
4. **Selection of a core committee:** Coalition of elected members of Panchayats is large. For purpose of co-ordination and facilitation selection of a core committee/ leader of the coalition who would inform the others of the next meeting and would be the focal point for any decision making needs to be selected by the coalition itself Case 2, the Mahila Panchayat Sangh selected an executive body had not only to facilitate meetings but also to promote the sangh in

terms of membership (in the initial period). While in CASE 1, Barwala, has an executive body, a representative of the larger coalition that was selected. The composition also was seen wherein due representation of women was thought out.

5. **Prioritization issues/ pressure groups and advocacy:** Once a common understanding as to why the coalition has been built issues and problems needs to be discussed and addressed. This would give the coalition a direction/ mission. Case I, in Barwala the coalition prioritized their problem to be addressed so that the coalition addresses issues and support the cause of all the members within the coalition. Issues were prioritized on the basis of commonality and individual difficulties. For the former issues like menace of flies and deforestation were taken up, while individual issues like pending cases in courts were addressed. The other Cases are still at the primal stage. These groups are at the stage of formation and undergoing training inputs like in the Case 3 or meetings along with the organisation in discussion of the kinds of issues and problems faced by the Mahila Sangh in Sitapur.

What did not work: The coalition, be it that of community based organisations or elected leaders of Panchayats, there have been underlying causes that have led to the feasibility or non-feasibility of such a coalition. A few are highlighted below:

- **Formation of an identity (exclusion):** The Barwala coalition of Sarpanchs was initially built with a composition of both the panchs and the Sarpanchs within the coalition. But as the number of panchs were few in the beginning and the inability of the coalition to bring the other panchs within the coalition resulted in the coalition becoming exclusively "Sarpanchs". It became an identity of Sarpanch, hence excluding the Panchs the panchs felt left out. Hence, causing some friction with the elected members of the Panchayats.
- **One time use for the coalition:** Coalitions are built around issues. But once the issue is tackled, the coalition's purpose is met resulting in the coalition breaking up. For instance, the coalition of community based organisation coming together for spreading awareness prior to the Panchayat elections. Once the task was over the coalition was not utilized for follow-up plans like capacity building of newly elected members. Even in the coalition of elected members in Madhubani, Bihar, ward members came together to demand for elections after the elections were completed in the state the coalition has not yet taken any other issue and had not met.

- **One party giving more than the other:** Many a times the participation of members is limited to seeking other members experiences and ideas, but not sharing one's own. Participation therefore, becomes one-way process rather than a two-way process of involvement and learning. This creates conflict within the coalition. Formalisation of who should do what within the coalition would bring the person or organisation within the coalition to account or their action.
- **Priority (Own problem bigger than the coalitions problem):** The case of the coalition in Andhra Pradesh for building awareness prior to the Panchayat elections found that though the members continued to participate, attend meetings and receive information from PRIA office. they were unwilling to take up responsibility in follow-up procedures in the final stages. One reason for such withdraw was seen as interpersonal conflict. While agreement around broad ideology and purpose existed, there were differences in style of functioning and mutual recognition. Similar case is seen in the Mukhivas coalition in Bihar wherein after Panchayat elections most of them are occupied in their own panchayats problems and solving them. They have not realized the positive aspect of working with the coalition in tackling issues collectively. The case of the Mahila Sangh in Sitapur is also facing the issue of tangible gains the coalition would provide to individual members.
- **Resources:** The lack of resources has also been expressed by the elected members of the coalition, hence their inability to afford the travel expenses to attend the coalition meetings. This came clear in the coalition of Sarpanch and Panchs in Sehore (MADHYA PRADESH) as well as the Mahila Panchayat Sangh in Kasmanda. Sitapur (UP) wherein the women members found mobility as a major constraint to come together and participate in meetings. Moreover. the culture of formal meetings outside Panchayats has yet not been evolved for the women.

Challenges- what needs to be done?

Sustaining the forum needs extensive communication. sharing experiences, disseminating ideas and resources. It is a dynamic process. Sustainability needs material resources, hence initially these coalitions are process driven which through linkages and concretization of relationship it is hoped that a formal structure would evolve. Facilitation of the organisations in the process is seen as pivotal along with the willingness and importance given to the coalition by the elected

Panchayat representatives. The following is not an exhaustive list but are pointers that need to be kept when working to sustain coalitions-

Multiplier effect? The coalition so built should have a multiplier effect. For instance, the case of the Sarpanch Sangh in Barwala. The success of a coalition would be measured if the value of the coalition is seen by other sarpanchas in adjacent blocks and them creating similar coalitions. The Barwala case in Haryana as resulted in similar coalition building in the adjacent block of Raipur Rani block as well as in Fatehabad (Raria),

Multi-purpose coalition? Coalition building could be sustained if the coalition is used for multiple-issues or is a multi-purpose coalition. For instance, the Sarpanch Sangh in Barwala, PANCHKULA, Haryana took up 17 cases. While the coalition of adolescent girls were used in Panchayat activities and developmental issues like health and literacy mission. This would ensure also consistent follow-up action that would keep the coalition functional

Mixed coalition which would include both representatives of community based organisations and elected members of the panchayats. As most of the cases pointed above the coalition of elected members could only be sustained with periodical inputs from the community based organisations. A coalition with both these parties would be beneficial not only providing mutual support but would create a space for elected members to Cain voice

All Training to Panchayat leaders should result in building coalitions of elected members. This in one way would enable the continuous sharing of experiences as well as would enable them to voice demand collectively to the Government functionaries and community based organisation -be it in the form of Capacity building inputs or information. Modules of the Training to PRI members should emphasis on leadership building and coalition with special focus on women and Dalit elected. The benefits along with existing cases should be presented in training as well as exposure visits to those areas where the coalition of elected members have done positive work. An interaction with the coalition of elected members would dispel the whole

© 2002 PRIA. The text may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes, provided credit is given to PRIA. To obtain permission for uses beyond those outlined in the Creative Commons license, please contact PRIA Library at library@pria.org. Please use the following citation:
PRIA (2002): Coalition Building for Self-Governance of the Panchayati Raj Institutions



Participatory Research in Asia
42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi-110062
Ph:+91-011-29960931/32/33
Web: www.pria.org