



Knowledge. Voice. Democracy.

**PRIA**

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**Information for participatory Democracy-  
Panchayat Resource Centres in Himachal Pradesh  
By  
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## Introduction

Working with the notion that knowledge is power, PRIA's intervention to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions in Himachal Pradesh has always contained a strong educational element. Some of the earliest work in Himachal has included pre-election campaigns to educate voters and the creation and dissemination of educational materials relating to Himachal's Panchayati Raj system and its functioning. The training of local elected officials - Pradhans, Up-Pradhans, and Panches - has been an ongoing feature of the intervention.

PRIA's primary goal in Himachal Pradesh has been to strengthen participatory democracy through the existing structure of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). In attempting this, the understanding is that true participatory democracy requires a solid base of informed, aware citizens. Since the passing of the New Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act in 1994, creating such awareness among voters and elected officials alike has been PRIA's chief endeavour.

In many villages of Himachal, access to information is a problem. A number of panchayats are accessible only by foot off of the main road. Most information relating to government programmes is held at Block or District offices, which can constitute a half-day's journey for ordinary people. The quorum meeting of elected gram panchayat members is only held bi-monthly, and people who have gone to these meetings in order to request information about government services have often been told, "You've come to the wrong place." The gram sabha convenes only twice a year. Villagers often do not know where to go with problems or questions relating to local governance, rural development, or existing government programmes.

Since 1996 PRIA has promoted the creation of "Panchayat Resource Centres" (PRCs) in Himachal Pradesh as a way to create grassroots bases of locally-relevant information. PRCs are community-based and community-managed sites where local citizens can obtain information relating to their Panchayati Raj system, rural development, citizen participation, women's empowerment, government services, and other pertinent issues. A PRC is functionally much like a library. Its primary resources are books, which can be read on-site or taken home for a specified amount of time. Yet ideally, a PRC is more than a library; it is a location where rural citizens can meet and discuss the problems of their community; it is place where need-based workshops, information sessions, and trainings can take place; it is also a place where community-based organisations can meet. According to PRIA's Activity Report on Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in Himachal Pradesh (1995-1998), the vision for these centres was as follows:

Firstly, these PRCs will serve as library cum reading rooms. People can borrow books and other learning materials or sit there and read. Secondly, activities like talks, lectures, demonstrations, etc. can be held here. Government officials from various departments like horticulture, agriculture, animal husbandry, panchayats, and rural development can come as resource persons and provide villagers with the necessary and relevant output Thirdly, the space can also be put to multiple-purpose uses like training centres. The skill thus learnt can later on be a means of income generation for the local people.

So the PRCs were originally envisioned as multiple-purpose community centres with the aim of promoting teaming among citizens, particularly in the realm of rural development, agriculture, livelihood, and panchayat issues. In the Himachal team's Activity Report (1995-1998), some of the rationale for the creation of PRCs is also shared. Mentioning both that "it is now an accepted truth that knowledge is power" and that people have an intrinsic "right to information" the report concludes that the creation of PRCs "will ensure greater accountability, transparency, etc." within the local Panchayati Raj systems where they are found. This statement reveals an assumption that providing information via PRCs will lead to 1) greater knowledge among rural citizens on local self-governance issues and 2) greater participation by these rural citizens in local self-governance processes and 3) greater transparency and accountability on the part of elected officials. Yet while the assumption is that PRCs, by their very existence, will aid the cause of local self-governance, 'strengthening local self-governance through the existing Panchayati Raj system' has never been stated nor pursued as an explicit goal of the PRCs.

While it can be assumed that this is at least a tacit goal of the PRC (because, after all, it is the broad aim of PRIA's entire intervention in Himachal), the fact that this goal has neither been explicitly stated nor consciously pursued has had certain consequences for the PRCs' development, particularly in its relations with the local gram panchayats. This issue is explored further in the section titled "PRCs and Local Self Governance."

In helping communities establish PRCs in Himachal, PRIA has learned that there is no simple blueprint for creating a PRC. By design, the PRC must fit the character and needs of the community in which it is located. Furthermore, it must conform to the resources available in the community. One community's PRC may operate only in the evenings, when villagers have returned home from work and school. Another community may have a PRC in a centrally-located general store which is open all day. Some PRCs are run by individuals; others are run by community groups. Some have the resources to acquire tables, chairs, and a range of books, posters, and materials. Others have fewer resources, and make do with the books provided by PRIA and other NGOs. Some are decorated with pictures of popular movie stars and religious images; others have bare walls.

This study is a review of three Panchayat Resource Centres in Rait Block (District Kangra), Himachal Pradesh. Each of these PRCs was founded by PRIA's Himachal team (Sohini Paul, Ajay Mohapatra, and Naval Kishore) in collaboration with its partner organisation in Rait, Samaj Seva Parishad (SSP). The three PRCs profiled in this study differ in form, function, history, role in their respective communities, and length of time they have been in existence. Each of these PRCs - in Tatwani, Ambadi, and Dhardhamb panchayats - is presented as a case study.

Following the case studies is a section titled "PRCs and Local Self Governance," which explores the existing relationships between the PRCs and the gram panchayats, the participation of active PRC members in the gram sabhas, and local attitudes towards self-governance. This section discusses ways in which the PRCs can do more to contribute to local self-governance processes in their respective communities. The potential of the PRCs to actually do harm to the cause of local self-governance is also presented.

Following this section is another, titled "Recommendations." The suggestions contained in this section are not solely my own, but instead reflect conversations which occurred between myself, PRIA's permanent staff in Himachal (Naval Kishore), the head of SSP (Hari Krishna Murari), and local users of PRCs. So the recommendations largely reflect the types of work already in progress in Himachal, and in that respect they are not all 'new.'

Before turning to the case studies, it should be noted that while these PRCs in some respects differ considerably from one another, at the root there are a number of characteristics common to all. One is that the PRC should be free and open to all community members, regardless of gender, caste, creed, class, educational level, etc. Another is that the PRC should either be in a public space, a semi-public space (like a local store), or in a home where community members-at-large will generally feel welcome. As one of the case studies below indicates, the best location for a PRC is a public or semi-public place; generally, forming a PRC in someone's home has proved to be problematic.

It has always been PRIA's intention that the PRCs should eventually become self-sufficient and self-sustainable. The issue of self-sustainability is a crucial one; the fact is that if a PRC is to function as a dynamic and relevant community institution, it must continually grow and develop. In practical terms, this means that the PRC must acquire new materials over the years - especially on government programmes. While PRIA and SSP have donated the initial materials (books, pamphlets, registers, etc.), a self-sufficient and self-sustainable PRC will eventually take up the task of choosing and acquiring new materials itself. At this time, none of the three PRCs profiled in this study could be described as 'self-sufficient.' It seems two things must happen in order for a PRC to reach this goal. One is the development of human resources. The need for a well-formed community group to plan for the maintenance and development of the PRC has become evident, as the case studies will show. The second thing needed for the PRCs to become self-sustainable is the development of material resources.

The community-based group responsible for the PRC must figure out how it is going to raise the money to acquire new resources, whether it is through donation, monthly dues, some entrepreneurial activity, or applying for grant money.

To state this point succinctly, 1) a PRC must be able to generate its own income in order to procure additional materials as needed and 2) a PRC must have a well-functioning community group attached to it in order to be able to generate that income and plan for the PRC's development. In creating and working with such groups in the three panchayats of Tarwani, Arnbadi, and Dhardhamb, both PRIA and partner organisation SSP have learned valuable lessons about how to create and sustain community-based groups. The case studies share some of what has been learned.

### Tatwani

Tatwani is a large, hilly panchayat in Rait Block tucked away from the National Highway and inaccessible by road. The panchayat consists of four small villages - Khabal, Langham, Salwana, and Sidhpur - in addition to Tatwani proper. Ask any person who lives in this panchayat what their biggest problem is, and they will tell you, "Access to the main road, to hospitals, to the market." To reach Tatwani from Rait - the nearest market and seat of the Block Development Office - one must take a jeep or infrequent bus to Jhirballa, a stop roughly six kilometres away. From Jhirballa, the only way to reach Tatwani is on foot. To do this, one has to cross the fifty-metre-wide Gaj River via stepping-stones, and then follow the water's curve on a pakka path which eventually winds through maize fields and banana trees to reach Tatwani proper. There is no link road direct to Tatwani. There is no bridge over the Gaj to get to this panchayat. When a person gets sick or a pregnancy becomes complicated, the individual must be carried across the river on a charpai. Even then, when Jhirballa has been reached, there is no guarantee that a jeep or bus will be found. There are no telephone connections to Tatwani. During heavy rains or in winter when the River Gaj rises from the snow falling high in the mountains, the women of Tatwani village say, "We can't go anywhere."

Beyond Tatwani proper, in the hills surrounding it, lie the four other villages of the panchayat - Khabal, Langham, Salwana, and Sidhpur. These can be reached on foot from Tatwani, although this can be made difficult in the rains as the terrain is quite steep and easily becomes muddy. Tatwani is famous for the hot springs which flow beneath its grounds. These occasionally draw foreign tourists who camp by the Shiva Mandir and bathe in the warm waters. The mainstay of Tatwani's economy, however, is agriculture, where rice, maize, and wheat are grown.

Due to its geographical isolation and difficulty in access, Tatwani is an ideal location for a Panchayat Resource Centre. Since March, 1998 Tatwani's PRC has been housed in the Tatwani Co-operative Agriculture Services Society, a small fair-priced shop run by Mahindra Singh. The shop is adorned with books provided by PRIA on the Panchayati Raj system, women's empowerment, and rural development. The shop itself has become an informal village centre, where people stop by throughout the day to chat with Mahindra Singh or read the Hindi daily paper, Punjab Kesri. Others borrow books from the PRC. In particular, Tatwani's Mahila Mandal has taken great interest in the maintenance and development of this resource centre. They often borrow books and use the information to build up their own understanding of their community's problems and how to tackle them.

Tatwani's PRC has not always been at this location. When the original PRC was founded in the summer of 1996, it was housed in the home of the gram panchayat's Pradhan, in village Salwana. The original inspiration for the PRC had come through discussions between PRIA staff and local panchayat members. It was subsequently decided at a gram panchayat quorum meeting that the Pradhan's house would be a suitable location for the fledgling PRC. Both PRIA and SSP donated books, newsletters, and bulletins. SSP paid for the delivery of the newspaper 10 Jhirballa, where it had to be picked-up every morning and taken to Salwana by a member of the Pradhan's family.

From the outset, the PRC in Salwana was beset with problems. Local people complained that the PRC was effectively inaccessible. As the PRC was in the Pradhan's house, rather than in a public or semi-

public place, many villagers were reluctant to visit it and request materials. Further, because both the Pradhan and her husband were busy with their own daily work, there was often no one at home to oversee the PRC. As a result it was 'closed' much of the time. The location of the PRC was also problematic: Salwana is quite a distance from Tatwani proper, and people began to feel that a PRC should be in a more central location. Added to these problems were allegations that the Pradhan's husband was taking the daily newspaper from Jhirballa, where he worked in the village pump-house, and keeping it solely for his own use all day.

In response to these complaints, SSP took up an evaluation of the Tatwani/Salwana PRC. Having reviewed the situation and concluded that it was unsatisfactory, SSP recommended that the location be changed. A meeting was convened for all interested villagers to select a new location. Mahindra Singh, the local proprietor of the fair-priced Tatwani Co-operative Agriculture Services Society, showed an early interest in the PRC. The group of community members who had complained about the previous PRC formed a core group of decision-makers for the new location. It was decided that Mahindra's shop would be an ideal place to house the PRC, and he agreed to run it there.

The PRC has been flourishing in its new location for the past 15 months. Perhaps its most formidable group of users is the local Mahila Mandal. This group of 33 members has met every Sunday since January to discuss the problems of Tatwani village. The group passes resolutions to solve the problems. The Mahila Mandal members, of which 3/4 are literate, have used the PRC as a resource centre to educate themselves both about the workings of the Panchayati Raj system and general rural development.

The resolutions passed by the Mahila Mandal are generally sent to the gram panchayat. Yet the gram panchayat often neglects to take up the issues with which it has been presented. When this happens, the members of the Mahila Mandal move forward to solve the problem themselves, contacting relevant government agencies as needed.

For example, in April of this year, the Mahila Mandal decided that a pakka path was needed through a cluster of Tatwani's fields. Having passed a resolution that a pakka path should be built, they left it to the gram panchayat to undertake the activity. The gram panchayat did nothing about this issue. They neither passed their own resolution regarding the need for the pakka path, nor approached the District Administration to procure funds for its building. The Mahila Mandal, frustrated by the gram panchayat's inactivity, began to collect money from amongst themselves and from interested villagers who had a stake in the creation of the pakka path. Altogether, the Mahila Mandal collected more than Rs. 7,000/-. They deposited this sum with the District Commissioner who, through a matching grant scheme, was able to donate the rest of the funds needed for the pakka path's construction.

Perhaps the Mahila Mandal's most crucial success has been in gaining sanction from the local Member of Parliament to provide a telephone connection to the village. The sanction came through this past April, although phone connections are yet to be installed. In this isolated panchayat - with neither road nor bridge for vehicles to reach it - having a working telephone line will be a significant aid to the community. Particularly when emergency medical care is needed, the telephone will provide a critical link with health services.

The Mahila Mandal members have grown more confident with each of their group's successes. They say that the Tatwani PRC has been an invaluable resource in helping them understand local governance processes. It has helped them learn how to take matters into their own hands when the gram panchayat has failed to take up their issues.

The Mahila Mandal members have been steadily reading the full range of books available in the PRC every topic from the Panchayati Raj system to agriculture to rural development. In particular, they enjoy stories about rural women. Jivna Devi, secretary of the Mahila Mandal noted that the book, *The Emancipated Women of Uttarkhand* is an important book for them because it recounts the experiences

of other rural women making their living, caring for their families, and dealing with local problems. 'They are hill women, like us,' Jivna remarked.

The Mahila Mandal members agree that more books on women's empowerment or women's development are most wanted. They also want books or other materials which will help them determine which steps to take when problems in the community arise. In recent months, both PRIA and SSP have been increasing efforts to procure brochures, pamphlets and other materials from government agencies explaining the work they do and programs available for rural people. In particular, PRIA and SSP are interested in getting the PRCs' addresses on the mailing lists of government agencies, so they can directly receive up-to-date information. Such a step would further the capacity of local community-based organisations to access the government's social services and other resources on their own.

All described above, a PRC is ideally not only a reading room and lending library, but a place to hold community-education programs. So far, the Tatwani PRC has hosted one community-initiated educational workshop. The Mahila Mandal members and other interested villagers expressed to SSP and Mahindra Singh their desire to learn about how to make jams. Organised through the Block Development Office in Rait, HMCC (Himachal's state food processing corporation) recently visited the PRC and conducted a jam-making class. This is one example of the PRC being used as a location for relevant adult education. As Mahindra Singh noted, further workshops could be undertaken, pertaining to election issues, literacy, or livelihood training "It all depends on what people want," he says - a remark which reveals the PRC's democratic underpinning.

Since the PRC has been located at the Co-operative Agriculture Services Society in Tatwani, the Pradhan has taken no interest in its functioning or maintenance. Mahindra Singh says that ward panches have occasionally come to the PRC to find information relating to the Panchayati Raj system, but there are no formal links between the PRC and the gram panchayat itself. Both Mahindra Singh and the Mahila Mandal members write this off as simple "lack of interest" on the part of gram panchayat members. Lack of formal involvement of the gram panchayat in the PRC is evidenced in each of the three PRCs profiled in this study. This issue is discussed further in the section titled, "PRCs and Local Self-Governance"

The existence of the PRC, however, has had some impact on local self-governance in Tatwani, despite the lack of participation by gram panchayat members in the PRC itself. Tatwani's most recent gram sabha meeting illustrates this. The meeting, which was held in March of this year, did not attract the required number of participants to make it legitimate (10% of the gram panchayat's population for the first calling of the meeting; 5% as in this case when it was a second calling). When Murarji and Tarsen Rana of SSP - who were attending the meeting as monitors - realised that the meeting would have to be adjourned due to the lack of quorum, they quickly gathered together the members of the Mahila Mandal, and with their attendance the meeting was able to go forward. At this meeting, a male gram sabha member suggested that the cost of birth and marriage registration in Tatwani should be raised, so that the panchayat could generate more income for itself. It was proposed that the registration cost be set at Rs. 50/-. The Mahila Mandal members protested, saying that the cost was far too high. A compromise was reached, and the cost of Rs. 25/- per birth or marriage registration was set. According to Murarji, the women had not stood up for themselves in such a way before - least of all in a public meeting like the gram sabha. He attributes this to the confidence many of the women have gained from their use of the PRC.

The Tatwani PRC is a well-functioning centre of information for community members. However, despite the fact that it has been in its current location for over 15 months, it is still very much in its initial stages. For example, the PRC has still not decided how it is to acquire new books and materials, and as such cannot be considered 'self-sufficient.' At this point, it is still relying solely on the donations of PRIA and SSP. Furthermore, there is no single community group which has taken formal responsibility for the maintenance and development of the PRC. The interested group of villagers who had complained about the PRC's former location in Salwana and helped establish the new location in Tatwani has since dissolved. Currently, the responsibility for every aspect of the PRC is left solely to Mahindra Singh.

Clearly, if the PRC is truly to be a community-based centre, a group of people are needed to oversee its development. Tatwani's Mahila Mandal is an organisation capable of becoming the primary custodians of the PRC. The group would be able to raise funds for the maintenance and development of the PRC; the Mahila Mandal has already proven its financial acumen in the development projects it has undertaken in the village. If its members agree to it, what is needed now is for formal links to be established between the Mahila Mandal and the PRC. Both Murarji (of SSP) and Naval (of PRIA) have noted the need for a community-based organisation to oversee the PRC, and both agree that 'linking' the Mahila Mandal with the PRC has a great chance of success. Unlike the previous community-based group, which had lobbied for the change in location (and subsequently dissolved), the Mahila Mandal already has a strong identity all its own as a group. Its dedication to the PRC is evident, and as its primary users the members of the Mahila Mandal are in a good position to participate in planning for the PRC's expansion and development.

### Ambadi

Ambadi is a village and a panchayat located in the central Kangra Valley, six kilometres from Rait, seat of the Block Development Office. Ambadi's terrain is mostly plains land, but its South-eastern perimeter is demarcated by the steep banks of the River Gaj. Erosion into the river is a long-standing problem in this area. Ambadi is 1.5 kilometres from the Patankort Mandi National Highway, and enjoys easy access to this via a link road. Most citizens of Ambadi are engaged in agriculture; even those in service usually have some cultivable land of their own. Rice, wheat, and maize, as well as cucumber, lady finger and tomatoes are grown in Ambadi. In addition to agricultural work and household chores, women often raise goats, cows, or bullocks.

The gram panchayat of Ambadi tends to undertake activities of physical development, such as building pakka paths, houses, water taps, and school buildings. The gram sabha in Ambadi remains weak, and the quorum for its meetings is often not met. Those who do attend the gram sabha are often poor people who go solely to ensure that their names have been properly registered for the Integrated Rural Development Program. It is widely assumed among citizens that the gram panchayat alone is responsible for the development of the village, and that democratic citizen participation goes no further than the ballot-box. There is no working relationship between the gram panchayat and the members of the gram sabha. People in Ambadi do not see the gram sabha as a forum to express their priorities or needs. Instead, a local person will tend to button-hole his or her ward panch in order to express an opinion or requirement.

Ambadi has had a few community-based organisations in recent years. The local Mahila Mandal, founded in the 1970's, has been inactive for some time, but PRIA's partner organisation, Samaj Seva Parishad (SSP) is currently working to strengthen and develop this group. Another inactive community-based organisation is Youth Social Club (YSC), whose story is recounted below. In addition to these, Ambadi has active members in Kishan Sabha, a powerful farmer's organisation associated with the Community Party of Shahpur Constituency.

Ambadi's Panchayat Resource Centre is housed in a small room adjacent to the general store run by Mangat Ram, an ex-military officer whose wife is a ward panch. This PRC serves not only Ambadi proper, but also the surrounding panchayats of Mehrana, Makroti, and Rajol. The PRC in Ambadi contains a number of books, almost all of which are in Hindi. A number of PRIA's own publications adorn the walls. These include centre bulletins (such as Participation and Governance), general books on participatory development (Forests and People), and books specifically relating to the PRIs of Himachal (Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act). The PRC also contains publications of SSP, such as its monthly newsletter (Gram Vedna). In addition to these, there are some agricultural publications published by HARC, and some brochures detailing the services of government agencies.

Pictures of religious scenes and popular celebrities adorn the walls, as do calendars, maps, and some posters related to the Panchayati Raj system. There is a list of seed prices at the discounted Block Office rate posted beside the entrance to the PRC.

The PRC is open as often as is Mangat Ram's shop, which is generally every day from early morning to evening. The PRC functions primarily as a library and reading room. A number of villagers stop by the PRC in order to read the daily paper (Punjab Kesris, which has been provided by SSP). Villagers are also able to borrow books from the PRC. Most who do so favour books on rural development, agricultural practices, and the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act. Some villagers come to the PRC looking for religious books. While the PRC does not formally own such books, Mangat Ram is happy to lend out religious texts from his personal collection. Both women and men use the PRC, but it is young people more than elders who come to borrow books.

The initiative for this PRC originally came from discussions during the winter of 1997-1998 between PRIA staff, Murariji of SSP, and gram panchayat members regarding the inaccessibility of information within the panchayat. Mangat Ram was nominated by the Up• Pradhan as a suitable candidate to run the PRC. When approached about the issue, Mangat Ram agreed to house the centre in the spare room connected to his shop. From the beginning, Samaj Sewa Parishad has played a major role in the organisation and development of this PRC.

SSP called a meeting of interested villagers at Mangat Ram's house. Women and men, youth and old people came to the meeting. The idea for the PRC was discussed, and people shared their expectations and hopes for the PRC. The meeting ended with a plan to meet again.

The second meeting, on 7 February, 1998, was marked by the inauguration of the PRC. Books, posters, pamphlets, and a painted signboard provided by PRIA were brought to Mangat Ram's shop. The PRC was inaugurated by an elder man of the village. While this PRC formally serves not only Ambadi proper but also the nearby panchayats of Mehrana, Makroti, and Rajol, most of the interested participants came from Ambadi itself.

Shortly after the inauguration of the PRC, a group of young men approached Murariji with the interest of starting a community-based group which could plan for its development. Another meeting was held, and from this, Youth Social Club was formed. This was predominantly a club of young men, and its creation seemed to have limited the participation of some of those individuals who had previously shown interest in the PRC, such as women and elders. This club met bi-monthly, on the 5th and 15th of every month. They discussed plans for the PRC, dreaming of a one-room office which could permanently house an expanded PRC with tables and chairs. Youth Social Club's interests extended beyond the PRC. They were able to procure Rs. 1,000/- from Nehru Yuvak Kendra for the creation of a playground. The group also had aspirations to begin a plantation, but from early on there was a rift developing between the group's leader and the rest of its members. One by one, plans which had been made (for a livelihood training, for the plantation, for a community centre) fell through, and the group members eventually grew disinterested and the group itself dissolved. Subsequent attempts by PRIA staff to re-convene a meeting of the group in the PRC were unsuccessful.

Since that time (October, 1998) there has been no active community group connected to the PRC. Efforts are now underway by SSP to revive Ambadi's Mahila Mandal in the hopes that its members will eventually take on the role of managing the PRC, as in Tatwani. In focusing efforts on this new group, the SSP has learned from the failure of the previous group and plans to work differently with this one. For one, SSP feels the need to inform the group about the resources available to them. YSC may well have failed because, from the outset, there were expectations among the members concerning what they would 'get' both from SSP and from the government. The second point is that the creation of the group should not be hurried. A long-term process of need-assessment among members is a crucial part of group creation. It is important, notes Murariji, to establish with the group which items they will be able to work on, and which are outside the group's scope of control. Beginning a group with too high an expectation of what it can accomplish can quickly lead to disenchantment and dissolution.



The Ambadi PRC has functioned primarily as a lending library and reading room. Yet the PRC also has the potential to be a centre of training and information dissemination on issues affecting the community. An example of this capacity in action is the health check-up camp which was organised at the PRC with help from SSP in the Spring of this year. During an informal meeting with PRIA staff in the PRC, a couple of old men had remarked that they were worried about failing eyesight and desired to see an eye-specialist. PRIA staff attempted to get an eye specialist to conduct a health camp, and when this was not possible, a one-day general health check-up camp for all gram sabha members was arranged with the help of the Block Medical Officer.

The Ambadi PRC thus is a well-functioning centre for information and has also undertaken an activity for the general welfare of the panchayat (the health camp). However, this PRC also has a number of problems. For one, there is no existing community-based group responsible for the maintenance and development of the PRC. Since the dissolution of the Youth Social Club, the PRC has been Mangat Ram's lone responsibility. A second problem is that the PRC currently has no means to acquire new materials. So far it has relied on PRIA and SSP to donate books and other reading matter. But if the PRC is to become self-sufficient, it will have to establish some way for it to procure new materials. Without a community-based group affiliated with the PRC, this will be difficult. While Mangat Ram has volunteered the space for the PRC and devotes time every day to its running and maintenance, it is unreasonable to expect that he alone should raise funds for new materials.

As in Tatwani, there is little participation in the PRC by members of the gram panchayat. While Mangat Ram's wife is herself a ward panch, and some gram panchayat members stop by the PRC to borrow books, there is no formal link between the gram panchayat and the PRC. When asked about this, Mangat Ram simply states, "They have no interest in the PRC." When asked whether they should be involved in the PRC, he replies, "I don't see why they should." When asked whether he attends Ambadi's bi-annual gram sabha meetings, Mangat Ram replies that he does not. Considering that Mangat Ram, as proprietor of the PRC, is probably one of the best-informed of Ambadi's citizens in regards to Panchayati Raj issues, the fact that he sees no point in attending the gram sabha suggests that information about Panchayati Raj is not enough to compel people to participate in its functioning. These issues pertaining to the relationship between the PRC and local self-governance processes will be further explored in the section, "PRCs and Local Self-Governance."

### Dhardhamb

Dhardhamb is a roadside panchayat located 10 kilometres from Dharamshala. The mainstay of the local economy, as with most panchayats in Kangra District, is agriculture. In the summer months paddy and maize are grown in the terraced fields; in the winter wheat is produced. The Dharamshala-Chambi highway curves around the edge of Dhardhamb, and along this roadside are a couple of shops selling general goods, a panchayat ghar, a school room, and an open field where boys can be seen playing cricket in the evenings. It is here that villagers meet one another and talk, passing time while waiting for a bus or gathering around the water tap where women fill their earthenware jugs. Here, on this roadside, there is a one-room brick building under construction, slated to be both the future home of Dhardhamb's Village Resource Centre, and the office of Sign Star Club, the community based youth organisation which has taken on the responsibility for the YRC.

Dhardhamb's VRC (community members have decided to call their information centre a "Village Resource Centre," rather than a "Panchayat Resource Centre" in order to reflect the range of local needs to which it caters) came into existence in March of this year. Since that time, it has been temporarily housed in a spare room in the home of Sudesh Sharma, Up-Pradhan of the gram panchayat, awaiting completion of its permanent home. While the VRC has been in its current location for three months, its transient nature is clear. The room has a couple of tables and chairs; books on Himachal's Panchayati Raj system and rural development are stacked on a mat on the floor. The efforts made in Ambadi to decorate the resource centre with posters and calendars has not been done here, in anticipation of the shift to the new building on the Charnbi-Dharamshala road.

The story of Dhardhamb's PRC is very much the story of its prominent youth organisation, Sign Star Club. Understanding the history and activities of the club is crucial to understanding the current state and future prospects for the YRC.

The Sign Star Club officially began in January, 1997. The village of Dhardhamb has a long history of organising cultural activities, such as performances of the Ramayana, traditional dances, and competitions. In 1996 a group of young people organised a sports day in memory of one of their friends who had recently died. The sports event was a success, and the group then went on to become registered as Sign Star Club. Initially focusing on cultural and recreational activities, the group has since undertaken work in the areas of sanitation, social work, village development, plantations, blood donation, and health check-up camps. Today Sign Star Club has 39 members, with both women and men equally active. Its members are all young people, with professions ranging from agriculture and teaching to business and entrepreneurial activities. They are a highly educated, articulate group who talk freely about the problems of their village and speak of 'seva' - their desire to serve their community.

The members of this club each contribute a small sum for its maintenance at its monthly meetings. Some of the projects undertaken by the group - particularly those in the realm of rural development - attract funds from the District or Block level administration. In recognition of the good social work accomplished by SSC, funds for the new PRC/office building have been provided by the local MLA. In the village of Dhardhamb, the group is seen as efficient, trustworthy, and 'able to get things done.' The gram panchayat sometimes calls upon SSC's members to help in organising the visits of political leaders or other official functions.

The idea for a PRC in Dhardhamb came from PRIA staff, who introduced the concept to the gram panchayat members in one of their monthly quorum meetings in February of this year. The panches showed some interest; the Up-Pradhan (who is himself also a member of Sign Star Club) agreed to house the PRC temporarily in his own home. He suggested that SSC would be an ideal group to maintain the PRC, and a meeting between SSC and PRTA staff was subsequently held in the panchayat ghar, from the beginning, the members of Sign Star Club had their own vision for the resource centre. As noted earlier, they insisted that their centre be known as a "Village Resource Centre" (Gram Sansadhan Kendra Dhardhamb) and that it contain books pertaining to a range of the village's needs: everything from agricultural information to books on competitive exams. When the new building opens (it is due to be completed in a matter of weeks), Sign Star Club members plan for the VRC to function as an evening reading-room and lending library. SSC members will take turns being 'on duty' at the VRC, issuing books and answering visitors' questions. SSC also plans to make the VRC a place where workshops and informational meetings can take place. In particular, Kewal Sharma, President of SSC, notes that they want to have some programs specifically geared towards illiterate community members, "So that they can find use in the VRC, too." When asked about their vision for the VRC, the SSC members often mention the availability of books to help poor students prepare for their competitive exams. This function of the VRC seems to be particularly important to these young people.

PRIA initially provided the basic materials for the VRC - books on Himachal's Panchayati Raj Institutions, PRIA bulletins, books on rural development and women's empowerment. Samaj Seva Parishad has also contributed books, including collections of folk poetry in the local Pahari dialect. PRIA provides the daily newspaper, Punjab Kesri. At this time Sign Star Club has begun to take up the responsibility for adding new books and materials to their collection. They have already found individuals willing to donate old competitive exam books. Although it is the youngest of the PRCs, Dhardhamb is already most the 'self-sufficient' among them. This is because Sign Star Club has both the capacity and will to procure its own resources.

The members of SSC have good relations with the gram panchayat for a number of reasons. For one, the panchayat's Up-Pradhan is also Director of the Sign Star Club. So a natural link exists between the two groups. In addition, according to Kewal Sharma, the gram panchayat will call upon SSC's members to help them with special activities, such as organizing functions and rallies. Last winter when the gram

sabha was adjourned twice for not reaching the required quorum of 5% attendance by villagers, the Up-Pradhan called upon SSC to help mobilise people to come to the meeting. The third meeting reached its quorum.

Despite these friendly relations between SSC and the gram panchayat, there is no formal link between the gram panchayat and the VRC. Asked about the participation of gram panchayat members in the creation and maintenance of the VRC, Sign Star Club members simply say, "They have no interest in the VRC." Some gram panchayat members have themselves come to the VRC to borrow books on the Panchayati Raj system. In fact, the book most often issued is the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act. According to Kewal Sharma, it is the gram panchayat members themselves who most often borrow this book. There is no feeling among SSC members that the ward panches should be more involved in the creation and maintenance of the VRC. The VRC is seen as a community space, a place where villagers can go to obtain information on a range of subjects. The VRC, of course, contains information pertaining to the Panchayati Raj system, but this is not the only - nor necessarily the primary - thrust of the information centre.

Despite their enthusiasm for community development and knowledge of local governance systems, SSC members could not themselves be described as 'active gram sabha members.' They put little emphasis on participation in the gram sabha, and seem not to fully trust the gram panchayat's capabilities to undertake all the development activities required by the village. In some respects, they see the potential of the gram panchayat somewhat marred by the fact that their members rely on the voting public to keep them in their seats. One member said, "A problem is that the Pradhan and panches, whenever they have some government scheme, they try to identify the beneficiaries from among their own voters." Sign Star Club, on the other hand, because its members are not elected, do not have to make such tactical considerations when undertaking local development work.

Sign Star Club itself operates a little bit like a gram panchayat. At their monthly meetings they create and pass 'resolutions' regarding needed activities in the village. They then send these resolutions to the appropriate government agency - say, the Irrigation and Public Health Department for a project relating to water and sanitation - and, if successful, they are given some funds to undertake the project. The group operates democratically, and there is equal participation by both men and women in decision-making and running the group. SSC members describe the activities of the gram panchayat as 'administrative,' and their own as 'cultural and social.' However, with this group undertaking rural development activities, there is bound to be some overlap with the activities of the gram panchayat. For example, SSC passed a resolution concerning a plantation that it would create and maintain. The gram panchayat passed the same resolution, giving them permission to do so. The resolution was sent from SSC to the Forest Department, which allocated the money for the project.

Because the Dhardhamb VRC is in a time of transition, it is yet to be seen exactly how the resource centre will operate in the village. In light of Sign Star Club's many past successes, there is little doubt that the VRC will function well as a community information centre. However, considering PRIA's goal of strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in Himachal, a relevant question to ask is whether this VRC will contribute to efforts to strengthen local self-governance - and if it does, how? If we want PRCs and VRCs to be more than just community centres, but to be community centres for the promotion of participatory democracy, then a few issues need to be taken into consideration, as the next section will show.

### PRCs and Local Self-Governance

Due to the fact that PRIA's primary goal in Himachal Pradesh is to strengthen local self-governance through the existing Panchayati Raj system, it is worthwhile to ask the question, "What do these PRCs have to do with local self-governance?" In asking what PRCs have to 'do' with local self-governance, a few things are meant. The first issue is whether PRIA intends to use these PRCs to strengthen Himachal's Panchayati Raj system. From the Himachal team's Activity Report (1995-1998), it would appear that it does. The Activity Report states that, with time, PRCs should lead to "greater

accountability, transparency, etc." among elected officials. If we take it as a given that PRIA wants the PRCs to contribute to its endeavor to strengthen local self-governance in Himachal, the second issue is whether PRCs have the potential to do so. For the time being, let's suppose they do have this potential, as it will be illustrated later on just how this is possible. Having taken the potential of PRCs to contribute to local self-governance as a given, the third issue is, "Are the PRCs in Ambadi, Tatwani, and Dhardhamb contributing to local self-governance in their respective villages now?" These three issues will be explored in this section of the study. Succinctly put, they are: should the PRCs be used to strengthen local self-governance, can the PRCs be used to strengthen local self-governance, and are the PRCs being used to strengthen local self-governance?

In each of the three communities profiled in this study, the PRC has become a positive community resource. Good things have come from their existence: local citizens have been able to learn about topics which are important to them (ranging from agricultural practices to government services to the Panchayati Raj system), existing community-based organisations have grown more efficient with access to a greater range of resources, and now in each of these communities an information base exists upon which community members can build as desired. The accomplishments of the community-based organisations associated with the PRCs deserve special mention. The Tatwani Mahila Mandal's success in procuring a phone line for their village is no small or insubstantial feat. The work of Sign Star Club has been universally appreciated in Dhardhamb. So the conclusion, of course, is that PRCs are positive community institutions. However, in light of PRIA's mission to strengthen not only local participation in development, but also a strengthening of the existing Panchayati Raj Institutions for local self-governance, perhaps we should also examine what the PRCs are specifically doing in this realm.

In the area of 'strengthening local self-governance,' the PRCs have had some success. For one, active participants in the PRCs (such as the Mahila Mandal in Tatwani and Sign Star Club in Dhardhamb) have with a little pushing from SSP in the case of Tatwani and the Up-Pradhan in the case of Dhardhamb - participated in the gram sabha. Both groups were willing to attend the meeting at least partially because the groups' members had an understanding of what the meeting was and what it was supposed to do. In the case of the Mahila Mandal, the members have shown an increasing confidence in themselves and their abilities, a change which was evident in the gram sabha when they stood up for themselves and demanded that the cost of birth and marriage registration go no higher than Rs. 25/-.

So a couple of tangible successes in the gram sabhas are evident. However, a working gram sabha is more than the required number of bodies gathering together and meeting the quorum; a working gram sabha requires participation of a special nature. It has long been recognised that one of the barriers to well-functioning gram sabhas in India's rural areas is due to local attitudes towards the government. India's rural people - and Himachal is no exception - have come to see the government as a provider. Rural people see their democratic duty as having been fulfilled once they have cast their vote in the ballot box. So the gram panchayat and the gram sabha, which are meant to be dynamic institutions of which local participation is the life-blood, have never been able to work properly as long as this view of government has persisted.

One of the rationales behind the creation of the PRCs was that providing rural communities with a local information base would eventually lead to better participation in local self-governance. And yet the evidence from Tatwani, Ambadi, and Dhardhamb does not support this assertion. Time and again interviewing people for this study, I encountered the attitude that the gram sabha is a waste of time, the gram panchayat is irrelevant to address the real needs of the community, and that people can do things better themselves. Even Mangat Ram, proprietor of the Ambadi PRC, and arguably one of the best-informed villagers about the Panchayati Raj system, says, "We elected the Pradhan to do our will. What need do we have to go to the gram sabha?" This reveals the commonly-held belief that democratic citizen participation begins and ends at the ballot box. It further indicates a belief in government-as provider, rather than a view of government as a dynamic institution in which every citizen has an ongoing role to play. Members of Sign Star Club were surprised when I asked so many questions of them regarding their attitudes towards the gram panchayat. They asked, "What does the gram panchayat really have to do with our Village Resource Centre?" These examples, coupled with the fact that

participation in the gram sabha has not been markedly different in communities with a PRC as opposed to those without one, challenge the notion that PRCs, by their very existence, will necessarily promote local self-governance. In fact, in each of the panchayats studied, there seemed to be an increasing emphasis among people in the abilities of NGOs and CBOs to solve the problems of the gram panchayat.

When asked about how the PRC will change the community in years to come, the members of the Mahila Mandal say that the villagers will be able to know about government schemes as they come up. They make no mention of the impact of the PRC on the community's system of local self-governance, nor even mention the potential for voters to become better informed before the next election. The Mahila Mandal members speak only about how individual community members will be able to access government programs in the future - independently, without the help of the gram panchayat.

For a community whose attitude is geared towards mistrust of the government and lack of confidence in its abilities, the PRC has become a resource centre where people can learn to do things for themselves. Arguably, this is a positive thing. Self-reliance and self-motivation for the good of one's community is extremely positive. But there is a danger that these types of activities may eventually lead to a further splintering of village development, with the gram panchayat on one side and the community-based organisations on the other, neither speaking to one another nor collaborating together.

Considering that PRIA's aim is to promote local self-governance through the Panchayati Raj system, this state-of-affairs should give us pause. Having recognised the fact that the potential is there for the PRCs to actually lead to further disenchantment with the Panchayati Raj system, and less demand from the public for their local governance systems to work properly (for if community-based organisations continually take up the work neglected by the gram panchayat, people may see no need to hold the gram panchayat accountable and put pressure on it to do its work properly), we can start thinking about ways to promote the opposite.

PRIA stands now at a critical juncture concerning these PRCs. In recognising the ability of the PRCs to actually harm the cause of local self-governance, we can take this time to think about how PRCs can be used instead to strengthen local self-governance. Can it be done? I think so. First of all, one of the main problems is that these PRCs have been set-up and maintained as 'information centres' with very little emphasis on gram panchayat issues. Gram panchayat issues are merely the topic of one or two books in the collection, not a central emphasis of the PRCs' existence. The problem is that these PRCs have been established without concerted effort to challenge the attitudes of local people concerning the Panchayati Raj system. So the people who use the PRCs - who themselves are already disenchanted with the government - automatically look upon the PRCs as a means for them to 'do for themselves.' As I said before, this is not in itself a bad thing. But it may eventually lead to further rifts between the gram panchayat and local citizens. At the core of PRIA's Panchayati Raj intervention in rural Himachal is the hope that, one day, individual citizens will finally say, "This gram panchayat belongs to me. I am a gram sabha member." So rather than viewing the government as an institution divorced from their lives, rural people will begin to see their local government as existing within themselves, seeing their own power and stake in its proper functioning.

The case studies above have suggested that merely providing people with information about the Panchayati Raj system will not in itself compel them to participate in it. The deeper attitudinal changes needed throughout the rural areas are much harder to come by, and require a special kind of effort, more than just providing educational materials. This implies that PRIA and SSP must do more to develop the PRCs into institutions that will facilitate and support good local self-governance. The following recommendations suggest ways in which PRIA and SSP can go about developing the PRCs' capacities to foster good local self-governance in their respective communities. These are not purely my own thoughts, but reflect conversations with Naval (of PRIA) and Murariji (of SSP) regarding what can and should be done with the PRCs at this crucial time.

The PRCs are still each in their infancy. They are each only now developing their particular character and position in their respective communities. Now is the time to help guide these PRCs towards the cause of strengthening local self-governance. If a concerted effort is not taken in this direction, the danger exists that the PRCs will become parallel institutions which challenge rather than respect the gram panchayat as the villages' primary governing body.

## Recommendations

PRIA as a support organisation working in Himachal Pradesh enjoys not only the grassroots base for promoting local self-governance, but also the critical distance which affords it a special 'outsiders' perspective on the activities. This is to say that PRIA has the ability to take the 'long view' of the efforts in Himachal. These recommendations are written with the idea that this ability confers upon PRIA a unique responsibility to share that critical awareness with local people.

1. PRIA must decide whether PRCs are intended only to be community information centres, or whether they should have some special function in the ongoing efforts to strengthen local self-governance in Himachal. If it is decided that developing the PRCs' potential to contribute to local self-governance is a goal, then PRIA should establish some indicators for monitoring how successful the venture is (such as monitoring participation in the gram sabha meetings where these PRCs have been established). Local people involved with PRCs themselves may have some interesting ideas about how the monitoring should be done. If they were given this monitoring responsibility themselves, this could lead to a greater feeling of local ownership in the process of strengthening local self-governance.

2. The issue of local self-governance should be brought to the table whenever PRIA interacts with local individuals affiliated with the PRC. PRIA should work to develop the notion that the PRC is not 'just' a community information centre, but has a particular function relating to self-governance.

3. As the PRCs are each very much in the initial stage (community groups are still being formed to run them; decisions are being made concerning how further resources are to be procured), now would be a good time to talk with interested people at the village level about the long-term goals of the PRC. One exercise which might be useful in accomplishing this is known as "Best Possible Future." In this, the facilitator (PRIA staff) asks members of the group to describe an ideal future, ten or twenty years down the road, when everything is "perfect." In that ideal future, what would the PRC look like? How would it operate? Considering that the purpose of this exercise would be to get people thinking about how the PRC can function to strengthen local self-governance, the most important questions are, "In that ideal future, how will our gram panchayat, gram sabha - in short, our institutions of local self-governance - operate?" and "What will the relationship between the gram panchayat and PRC be?" The Best Possible Future exercise should result in the PRC group creating concrete goals (both long- and short-term) oriented towards creating that future in their PRC. These goals could be written on large pieces of paper and posted around the PRC. They should subsequently be referred to in every meeting of the PRC community group.

4. Community-based organisations should be encouraged to recognise their stake in their village's gram panchayat. When CBOs begin to feel a stake in the workings of the gram panchayat, they themselves can act as watchdogs. The work undertaken by SSP with the Mahila Mandal in Tatwani is a good example of this type of encouragement. Considering the success of both Tatwani's Mahila Mandal and the Sign Star Club, putting these two groups onto the task of strengthening local self-governance would most likely see results. Encourage the groups to set tangible objectives for their communities, like full quorum at the next gram sabha.

5. During group meetings in which educational activities for the PRC are being planned, ask the group to consider educational activities which pertain to local self-governance. Health check-up camps and jam-making classes are both relevant, positive, community events. But perhaps the community-based organisations affiliated with the PRCs could also come up with educational activities which have relevance to local self-governance, like pre-election campaigns, an information session on matching

grant schemes and other programmes which make resources available to rural people through the Panchayati Raj system.

6. Both Naval and Murariji already recognise that the PRC will have to reach out to the gram panchayat, because the gram panchayat members have shown little interest in reaching out to the PRC. Panchayat members should be invited to all meetings concerning the PRC, even if they never show up. Keeping the channels open is important. A representative of the PRC could be encouraged to attend the bi-monthly gram panchayat quorum meeting and report on the PRC's development. Gram panchayat members may have their own ideas about the PRC development, and space should be made for them to express this.

7. All of the individuals and groups interviewed for this study expressed an interest in participating in an "exposure visit" to see other PRCs.

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