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# Innovations in Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions by Voluntary Organisations in India

## 1.0 Background:

The Joint Action Programme on Panchayati Raj was initiated in mid 1995 by Society for Participatory Research In Asia (PRIA) and its Network of Collaborating Regional Support on Organisations (NCRSOs) in 9 states of the country. This joint venture was primarily a reflection of the commitment for bolstering the process of local self governance in the post 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments era. It was one of the pioneering steps towards strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions. PRJA conceived the idea of learning by doing, quintessentially a participatory approach, as an appropriate strategy for building collaboration with the government and other actors in the civil society.

PRIA and its Network of Regional Support Organizations (NCRSOs) decided to undertake strategic interventions for strengthening PRIs. The regional support organisations (RSOs) of the network were CENCORED (Patna), SAHAYI (Trivandrum), SAMARTHAN (Bhopal), SSK (Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra, Lucknow) and UNNATI (Ahmedabad). The rationale for this intervention was to enhance community participation and people centered development. The constitutional provisions accord new opportunities and possibilities for engendering new leadership among women and other weaker sections. In a broader perspective, this programme envisaged Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as a vehicle for strengthening and consolidating civil society in the country.

The joint action programme of the Panchayat was indeed an innovative step when the RSOs decided to come together and work for the PRIs across the country. The significance of the collaborative programme was realised in that in different ' socio- economic and political situations, a variety of interventions were planned, experiences shared and replicated elsewhere as models of self - governance. This paper primarily endeavors to highlight some of the innovative mechanisms and strategies adopted by the support organisations or partner NGOs.

## 2.0 Coverage Under the Joint Action Programme:

The coverage of the Joint Action Programme is tabulated below:

Table: 1

	Name of the RSO	Name of the State	No. of Districts	No. of Vas	NO. of GPs
1	CENCORED	BIHAR	39	58	160
2	CYSD	ORISSA	12	13	55
3	PRIA	HARYANA	6	12	60
4	PRIA	HP	3	5	40
5	SAHAYI	KERALA	11	14	45
6	SAMARTHAN	MP	15	15	60
7	SSK	UP	14	28	85
8	UNNATI	GUJARAT	6	17	88
9	UNNATI	RAJASTHAN	5	12	58
		TOTAL	110	174	651

All the NCRSOs function primarily for the capacity building of voluntary organizations. Therefore, strategically, it was decided to work in close collaboration with the implementing partner NGOs of each RSO. Moreover, it was also agreed upon that each support organization will work directly with selected panchayats for micro-planning experiments.

The coverage as detailed out in table 1 is the sum total of Panchayats covered by the support organizations in collaboration with their partner NGOs. The intervention covered 651 Gram Panchayats in 110 districts across 9 states. It is to be noticed that all the less developed states viz. Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, commonly referred to as BIMARU States was covered.

### **3.0 Strategic focus of the programme:**

The PRI collaborative programme emphasised the following principles:

1. PRIs should be viewed as institutions of Local Self Governance and not mere implementors of centrally - determined development programmes.
2. Active participation by women and other weaker sections in decision making process with a view to enhance their role. status and leadership skills in local self - governance should be emphasised.
3. PRIs should assert their access to and control over natural and human resources. As well as other development resources available with State and national governments.
- 4, Programme for strengthening PRIs will entail clarity of their roles. systems of governance, accountability, transparency and mutual inter-linkages.

### **4 .0 Key interventions areas:**

There are five major components in the programme:

1. Orientation, Training and Educational Support.
2. Information Dissemination
3. Micro-planning or Bottom-Up-planning.
4. Research and Documentation.
- 5, Influencing Government.

#### **4. 1 Training**

The new Panchayati Raj Amendment Act is a mile-stone in Indian democracy. However, its significance is rarely understood in holistic form. Infact, there is need to build a common understanding of the concepts and issues entailed in the 73rd & 74th Amendment Acts. Since the Joint Action Programme interventions focused on capacity & skill building of small organisations on local self-governance, it was felt that the organisations should first have a clear and common understanding on the provisions of the Ace, as well as its implications for people centered development. Imparting training as the initiation process was considered an essential intervention to fill up the information gap, as well as to sensitise organizations on the concept of local self-governance.

The process of intervention began with the master training of trainers (MTOT) held at PRIA. The participants from the RSOs were provided with basic and essential information on the PRIs and their relevance for people centered development. The trainees at MTOT were supposed 10 train the state-level Vas.

The RSOs in their respective States conducted State-level Training of Trainers (STOT) for the grass root level voluntary organisations so that these trainer organizations can relate effectively with the selected panchayats to strengthen the latter in realising the principles of Panchayati Raj. At the State

level training programmes state specific Acts and provisions were discussed and analysed, a common understanding and frame work were developed.

Subsequent to the STOT, the VAs organised trainings for the Panchayats to inculcate among them principles and implications of the Panchayati Raj Act. A number of follow-up trainings as per the need of individual panchayat were also organised.

#### **4.1.2 Information Dissemination**

In the beginning of the programme when field visits were made to do a situational analysis of the Panchayats, it was realised that there was a conspicuous absence of information and awareness at the village and panchayat level. The Panchayat members and the Gram Sabha members were not aware about the new amendment enacted. The major source of information was the media.. Whatever information was percolating down to the village level was diluted in nature. A state of confusion prevailed among the panchayat members. Government officials and some informed PRI functionaries were manipulating the information according to their convenience. Initially, there was even dearth of relevant information for the VA worker. Taking into account the existing information gaps at the VA and Panchayat levels. there was a genuine need to provide authentic information at different levels.

The RSOs considered that information dissemination was essential so that proper and updated information can be provided to the VAs and Panchayats, It was felt that, if relevant information reaches the grass root, people can utilise the same for their development. Since the RSOs were working for the capacity building of the grass root organizations, various educational materials were prepared in the form of manuals (for the VA worker), booklets, pamphlets and posters (for field level) to make the communication process more effective. Audio and video cassettes were also developed to communicate to the neo literates and illiterates.

The voluntary organizations in order to disseminate updated information to the panchayats, developed a number of systems like monthly meetings with the line departments, the panchayat members and with the community.

#### **4.1.3 Microplanning:**

In India development initiatives in previous decades were addressed through a top down approach model where the beneficiary that is the community, were not considered to be the primary stakeholders. This approach led to the negligence of micro level issues. The implementation of the plans and schemes was viewed to be the responsibility of government officials. This in turn created dependency of panchayats and the community on the government. The Panchayati Raj Amendment Act paved the way for decentralised democracy in the country giving formal recognition to panchayats. These Panchayats have a constitutional mandate of preparing plans for their economic development and social justice. The amendment created the opportunity for the first time for the local people to participate in the planning process. In the existing situation of dependency and lack of information it was considered essential to intervene with panchayats for strengthening their capacity to plan. It was also essential to remove the dysfunctional aspects of decision making, a product of the top-down approach to development.

In order to achieve people's participation it is imperative to motivate the community to come together and analyse their problems and take collective decisions to solve the problems at their level. If people are involved in planning, they can also take up responsibilities of implementing the plans. Actually, people's participation in the planning process generates new perspectives and additional resources. Thus bottom up planning also aims at encouraging participation of the people. Besides, this approach accords importance to the participation of women and backward section of the community who were previously never involved in the planning process.

The main objectives of the micro level planning are:

To develop and operationalise a concrete model of bottom up planning with gram panchayats.

Organisations took up bottom up planning as a direct field level intervention to understand the grass root dynamics of self governance. micro planning is that it enhances the community's self reliance. So far the top-down approach had created dependency on the line departments and the state government. The panchayat was considered as a mere developmental scheme implementing agency. The panchayats were also unaware of the technical difficulties involved in getting projects sanctioned from the government departments. Thus, to encourage and ensure people's participation in the planning process and develop skills and capacities of panchayat members to plan effectively, the process of micro planning was initiated.

## **4.2. Influencing Government.**

In the post 1947 era, the constitution of India rested enormous power with the state, and the government took charge of the overall responsibility for development and social change. Since then the efforts for development were made in a very centralised manner and essentially following the top down approach. In order to facilitate the effective implementing of developmental schemes, a number of acts and amendments were promulgated which ultimately accorded power to the state and in turn strengthened the centralised system of governance,

After the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and implementation of the Panchayati Raj System, the need to involve people in the process of planning and implementation of developmental activities was formally recognised. However, the panchayats are still found to be depending on State and Central Governments for initiation and implementation of all developmental activities. This is because till date all the institutions responsible for development are working for stale governments. Hence, a general state of confusion and contradiction is prevalent in most states.

In order to facilitate the process of strengthening local self-governance, the joint collaborative programme realised the need to influence the government on various issues. As intervention progressed. more and more problems began to unfold and subsequently efforts were initiated to influence the government.

## **4.3 Research**

In the initial stage when the interventions were started with extensive training programmes for the Voluntary Organisations and Panchayats, it was realised that concurrent assessment was also essential to evaluate the impact of these interventions. During the interactions with Panchayat members it was also realised that the elected representatives especially those from the backward communities and women were never involved in the of decision making process. Taking into consideration the prevalent situation of confusion and lack of awareness. research and documentation on PRI activities was envisaged as an important step towards achieving the following goals;

- To collect information at a wider level
- To assess ground realities
- To evaluate the impact of the activities
- To formulate new strategies for future interventions
- To influence policy changes

## 5.0 Innovations of the programme:

The following section contains some of the innovative aspects of the programme.

### 5.1 TRAININGS:

#### 5.1.1 Panchayats as units of capacity building

The previous experiences of organising trainings at the block level have revealed that trainings were not accessible to all the panchayat members, specially the women. Thus, to make learning accessible for everybody including Gram Sabha members, trainings were conducted at the panchayat level. After the STOTs, VAs organised follow up trainings for groups of Panchayats at the village level in their own working areas. Separate trainings for women were also organised. Since these trainings were organised at the village itself, the environment was conducive for effective learning.

#### 5.1.2 Participatory method

The trainings on PRI for the first time emphasised on participatory methods as these training programmes stressed on experiential learning rather than traditional teaching methods like lectures.

The training modules were designed according to the specific requirements of the grassroots level institutions. In the states of MP, UP, Gujarat and Kerala, an abridged and simplified version of state Acts were prepared in the local language. As a part of training, various meetings were also conducted to create awareness about the PRI Act.

#### **Designing Training Modules with the people in Madhya Pradesh.**

In the panchayat Sirsod in Gwalior district of M.P., one of the partners voluntary organisations organised a panchayat level training for the gram panchayat and community on the PRI Act. The panchayat chowkidar informed the panchayat members and community about the training programme.

On the day of training, it was realised that none of the members have come to attend the training programme. After interacting with the community and the panchayat members it was found that the community members were not properly informed. People were basically not interested as they did not know how these trainings would benefit them. Consequently, visits were made asking people about their needs and what the training programme should contain. The content was finally developed after discussing with the panchayat and the gram sabha members. The date and time were also fixed with them for the next training. The meeting was attended by all the Panchayat members. During the training, participants shared their problems with the government officials. This experience sharing helped the trainers as well as the trainees to understand issues in the perspective of the ground reality and work out solutions. Besides, the training helped in establishing the interface between the panchayat and the Government officials.

### 5.1.3 Regional Trainers

The State training of trainers developed a common frame work for providing trainings at the VA and panchayat level. Taking into consideration the large number of people to be trained, the voluntary agencies developed regional teams. The team created at the regional level supported the voluntary organisation of its region to conduct panchayat level trainings. These regional teams al so helped to identify and develop key resource persons at the block and district levels in the states like M. P.

### 5.1.4 Cost sharing

In some states like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat where trainings for Panchayat members were organised, villagers came forward to share the cost of boarding and lodging. In a few cases, even the panchayat representatives approached the local VA to organise training for them and for which the former made all the arrangements.

### 5.1.5 Experienced villagers and PRI members as Key Informants

In many States like Himachal Pradesh. UP, MP, Gujarat and Rajasthan experienced villagers and panchayat representatives were involved as resource persons in the training programmes conducted at the panchayat level. In the follow up trainings focus was on issues related with the functioning of PRIs like financial and administrative problems at Janpad, Zilla panchayat and block level. The sharing of experiences of PRI representatives on commonly encountered problems and their solutions helped them enormously.

## 5.2 Microplanning:

### 5.2.1 Reversal of planning process

The conventional planning process has always followed a top down approach whereby centralized decisions are imposed upon people. In contrast, micro planning essentially follows the bottom up model where people's participation in the planning process is regarded as the quintessential component. In case of the joint collaborative programme the second approach was followed. where the community was mobilised to participate in panchayat level planning process. Right from the stage of formulating the bottom-up planning strategy to the final plan preparation, panchayat representatives along with the community were involved. The planning process included the following steps.

- identification of problem
- Analysis of problem
- Prioritisation of problem
- Preparation of action plan
- Gainfully accessing locally available resources.
- Assigning responsibilities
- Implementation of action plan

### 5.2.2 Ensuring Participation of women and marginalised groups

Conscious efforts were made to involve the marginalised sections like women and SCs and STs in the planning and decision-making processes. For instance, in Himachal Pradesh these sections were actively involved in the problem analysis and the problem prioritisation stages. Women were also encouraged to participate in Gram Sabha meetings.

### 5.2.3 Promoting holistic plan

For the first time efforts were made to prepare an integrated plan at the panchayat level rather than an issue-based one for economic development and social justice. Taking into account the priorities of the panchayats, action plans were also drawn up.

In contrast to the traditional way of target oriented and top down determination of needs, priorities, resources and beneficiaries, in participatory planning process the community has determined its own priorities and felt needs towards realising the goal of comprehensive development.

#### **Himachal Pradesh provides a model trend**

A micro planning exercise was carried out by Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) in Kehar panchayat of Mandi district in collaboration with a grassroot NGO. Rural Technology and Development Centre (RTDC)

**Formation of Core group and team of volunteers** - Since the aim of this exercise was to develop self-reliant panchayats, people's active participation in the entire process was an important pre-requisite. In order to achieve this a core group was formed which consisted of representatives of various community based organisations and panchayat members. They were mainly staff of the grassroot NGOs. members of Nehru Yuvak Mandal, Mahila Mandal, Panchayat representatives and community members.

The role of the core group was to regularly monitor, review and carry forward the process. At the same time a team of volunteers from all the wards was formed to collect household data.

**Community problem analysis and identification of development priorities:** This was done in all the 6 villages in a participatory manner. The members of the core group were mainly facilitators. whereas the actual work of discussing the problems, identification of development priorities, solutions and strategies was done by the community members themselves.

An innovative method in getting the people to actually discuss and think about their own village's development plan was by making them actively participate and be involved in the entire process. After the problems were listed down in each of the meetings, the people present identified the first three prioritised problems of their village. Based on the identified priorities, strategies were developed by the people themselves, by taking into consideration the locally available resources in terms of labour, capital and raw materials.

**Linkage with district administration and concerned government department for implementation-** Members of the core group who had compiled the Panchayat plan met the Deputy Commissioner and government officials of concerned departments in order to implement the plan made by the people. The main objective was to get sufficient funds and government co-operation in the implementation process and replicate the process elsewhere.

Numerous examples of collaboration with the Government programmes and mobilizations of district development resources as per the micro plans of the panchayats were found in the States of UP, Rajasthan, Bihar, Kerala and MP. One such successful case of collaboration with the district administration was found in the Sehore district of MP.



### **Interlinkages with the Government**

In Panchayat Jamunia, district Sehore of Madhya Pradesh the gram panchayat community members had made a plan to construct a drainage system. Resources mobilised from the panchayat, and contributions made by the community and were VA members. The overall collection was not sufficient to fulfill the requirements. In the meantime, the community and panchayat had decided to undertake the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) with the help of the District Administration and TLC committee. On October 2nd 1996, the Collector inaugurated the campaign in the village. delivering the speech, he announced that if the panchayat achieves total literacy two months, special financial help would be given to the panchayat, The literacy campaign was taken-up as a challenge and the ward level teams were made to undertake the classes. The RSO involved in the process, helped in planning and implementation of the campaign. In between, the collector visited to see the progress. While discussing various other issues he came to know that the panchayat community were trying to mobilise resources for drainage construction. The campaign was completed and the district administration sanctioned Rs.50,000/ to the panchayat which was utilised in construction of the drainage system.

## **5.3 Information dissemination:**

### **5.3.1 Pre-election voter awareness campaign**

In order to make the voters aware about the Panchayati Raj system and Panchayat elections, a pre-election campaign was undertaken in Himachal Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa. Various methods were used to create awareness among the voters. The communication modes were varied like street play, song and dance in the local dialect. Community based organisations like youth clubs, Mahila Mandals, anganwadi workers and even school children were involved in this process.

### **5.3.2 Establishment of Panchayat Resource Centres**

In nearly all the states the panchayat members and VAs voiced the need for a Panchayat Resource Centres (PRC) to bridge the existing information gaps. These PRCs have been established at various levels like regional levels (cluster of 3-4 districts), panchayat and village levels. Presently, these PRCs are involved in collection, compilation and dissemination of region specific informations on PRI through printed newsletters and organisation of regular meetings in their own regions for sharing news, views and informations. Besides, it also provides a common forum for sharing experiences at the regional level. Some PRCs even have library cum reading space.

In Uttar Pradesh. three PRCs have been established. two in Eastern. and one in Southern region of the state. Each PRC is managed by a team of two resource persons. Regional level meetings of the VAs are also organised by these centres. They have also started publishing regional bulletins in the local language for the panchayat representatives called "ATHAI" and "AAS-PASS ". Besides, some joint programmes have been taken up by these resource centres. ??(For example, the PRC at Muhammadabad district Ghazipur had organised a block level conference of the Pradhans in which three local VAs were involved.

In Madhya Pradesh, a regional network of 25 organisations Shakti is involved in the dissemination of information in 7 districts of the Gwalior-Chambal region. There is a core team of 7 members which is involved in collecting, compiling and disseminating informations regarding panchayats in the region. Shakti publishes a newsletter "BIGUL" every alternate month. This is published in the local language. A subscription of Rs.25 per annum is at present around 200 panchayats are subscribing BIGUL. Another regional newsletter from the Chattisgarh area is also published. These news letters are the platform for exchange of information and experiences.

### 5.3.3 Information Centres

In certain states, to disseminate updated information at the grassroots level, centres have been established at village and panchayat levels. For example, in Bihar, information centres have been established at the Panchayat level to raise the awareness level among the Panchayat functionaries and the community on the issue of Panchayati Raj. In the beginning, meetings with the community were conducted by VAs and the structure of the information centre was discussed. After these meetings, two groups were formed (viz., women's group and men's group).

The leaders of these groups were entrusted with the responsibility of establishing an information centre at a pre-determined mutually convenient place. The source materials, booklets, posters, pamphlets, were kept at each centre. Members of VAs conducted meetings at the information centre at an interval of 15 days to discuss problems and monitor the ongoing activities.

### 5.3.4 Information Centres as perceived by stakeholders

The Information Centre is envisaged as a place for receiving and sharing information. During field visits it was found that the community members who are the primary stakeholders, perceive the Information Centre (IC) as a platform to exchange all sorts of information and experiences regarding the Panchayat affairs. Besides, the Centre was viewed as an interface between the Government and the community. Even the BOO has acknowledged the catalytic role of the ICs towards mobilising the Gram Sabha.

## 5.4 Kishori Panchayat - Catch them young

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act laid emphasis on empowerment of women through reservation in PRIs. Adolescent girls were envisaged as the future leaders of panchayats. Consequently, it was realised that to enhance the role of women in PRIs it is best to train young girls in leadership skills and PRI affairs so that they can lead successfully in future. Kishori Panchayats were set up with the above objective in mind. In states like Bihar, these bodies were found to be engaged in mobilising and motivating women to attend information centre meetings and take part in Panchayat activities.

In course of PRI intervention, a support organisation in Bihar, organised training for the women's groups at Bochahan village. During the training programme it was observed that adolescent girls were also attending the programme with their mothers. Their presence was quite visible in the meeting of the information centres.

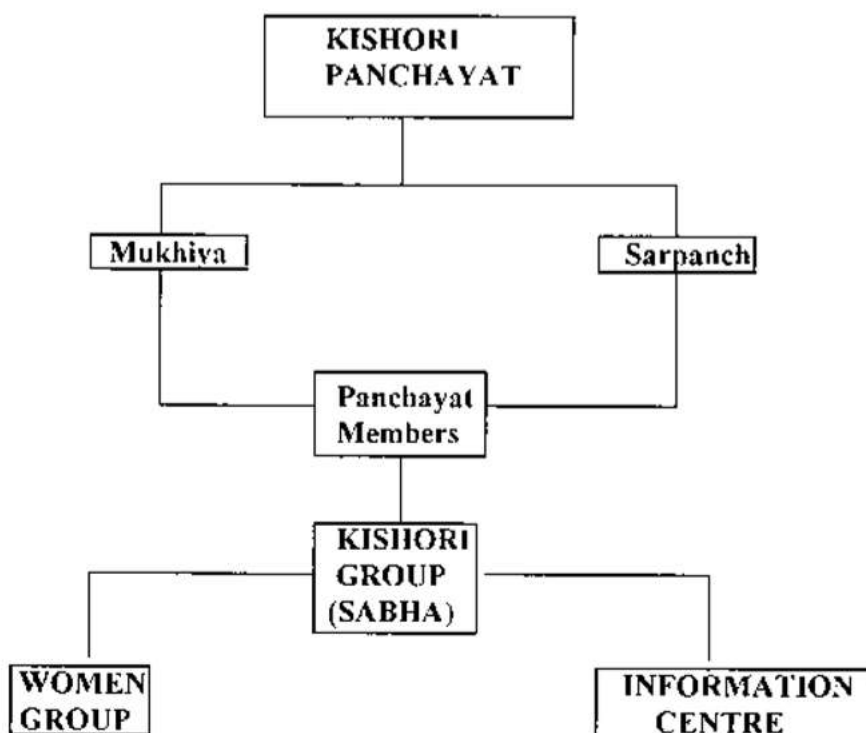
In the initial stages, the interventions included awareness generation classes in middle schools, formation of girls' group to disseminate information and create awareness among the common people. Taking into consideration the interest and initiative taken by adolescent girls in these matters, "Kishori's" (adolescent girls) having potential leadership skills were identified to take a lead role in organising Kishori groups. To develop the capacity of these leaders, a training on Panchayati Raj communication was organised. BY WHOM?? After the training, the Kishori groups were linked with the women's group and a number of joint meetings were organised. Mock Panchayats were also held for imparting practical skills about the working of PRIs among the Kishoris.

### 5.4.1 Objectives

- To develop awareness regarding Panchayat Raj among adolescent girls.
- To use Kishori Panchayat as an effective communicating media to reach women.
- To develop capacities, particularly leadership skills, among the women panchayat leaders of tomorrow.

### 5.4.2 Structure

The basic body of Kishori Panchayat is the Kishori Group. this group forms the Kishori Sabha which is equivalent to the Gram Sabha of PRI. Above such 7 Kishori Sabhas there is a elected body of 14 Panchayat members (2 from each Kishori Group or sabha). Among them there is an elected Mukhiya (Pradhan) and Sarpanch (Naya Pradhan). Apart from this forward linkage a backward linkage has also been established with women group and Information Centre. The hierarchical figure which emerged with all linkages is as follow.



Note: firm line shows forward linkage and dotted line shows backward linkage

### CASE STUDY: Mobilising and motivating women to attend Information Centre meeting

Gunja and Sangira are members of the Kishori Panchayat linked with Karanpur Bochahan women's group of Bochahan Panchayat of Muzaffarpur district. Both of them made a lot of efforts to organise women, especially the younger and newly married ones. It was not a difficult task for them since they had easy access to all the households in the panchayat. Whenever, a meeting of women's group was organised they would always participate and try to create a suitable learning environment to enhance the process of awareness generation. '??? HOW IS IT DONE??????'

### 5.5 Participatory research

In order to have authentic information and proper understanding about the Panchayati Raj, the RSOs undertook participatory research involving people in research activities. Qualitative data on people's perception on various issues concerning PRIs were collected and analysed with the help of panchayat members. The study findings were also shared with the community and subsequently, future action plans were drawn up through participatory planning.

## 5.6 IMPACT

The intensive grass root level efforts undertaken by the support organizations to develop a common understanding on local self governance and to strengthen panchayats, had enormous impact in terms of the following broad areas:

- Creation of a common understanding about PRIs among the Voluntary Organisations
- Emergence of PRI as an important issue at the Voluntary agency level
- Capacity building of VA representatives to train panchayat members on Panchayat Raj issues
- Emergence of opportunities of interface for panchayat members with the development administration
- Enhancement in the awareness levels of panchayat members
- Increase in participation of women and marginalised sections in training programmes
- Development of better understanding of the process of micro planning by the voluntary organisations
- Perceptible increase in the awareness and confidence levels of the PRI
- representatives and members of community based organisations
- Development of self reliance and self esteem among the PRI members and community, resulting from their involvement in the bottom up planning process
- Regularisation of panchayat and Gram Sabha meetings
- Successful utilisation of a valuable resource by the people for their own development
- The newsletters published by the VAs have helped in spreading awareness and adding local perspective to the issues
- The educational materials prepared in local languages have widely popularized PRI issues among the local communities

## 5.7 Conclusion

5.8 The 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts accorded a strong and secure footing to the decentralisation process in India. In fact, the very momentum to the process of democratic decentralization was initiated through the introduction of these Acts. However, the decentralisation process in the country has to go a long way to attain effective self-governance at the grassroots level. Considering the last four years of the functioning of PRIs as a period of infancy, a more innovative approach needs to be promoted and experimented with to bolster people centred development. The concept of decentralisation entails acceptance and respect for the cultural specificity and management practices of the local community. It is a widely accepted fact now that voluntary efforts have an inherent tendency to promote local level initiatives; again the very nature of voluntary initiatives promote innovativeness and alternative approaches to the development process. Therefore, voluntary efforts should be entrusted with greater responsibilities and space so that they can bring forth a variety of

alternative models of bottom up development and governance for wider replication and influencing policy changes.

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